

Some Images of a “New Creation” in Twentieth-Century Art

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In order to hear the breath of the new day in the desert, cleanse your hearing and wipe away the old days. . . .

—Kasimir Malevich

Abstract

The theme of destruction is so common in twentieth-century art that it is easy to make the superficial mistake of dismissing much of modern art as dealing only with death and despair. However, a closer study of this period can reveal that there has also always been a fascination with the subjects of birth, renewal, and new beginnings. Many of the art forms of our century exhibit a profound and purposeful break from the past and can be understood as a continuing attempt by modern artists to create a unique and unprecedented visual language for the age in which we live. This article looks at the works of some twentieth-century artists to show that, whether they were aware of the Bahá'í Revelation or not, many of these artists have been compelled to express the quiet, yet unmistakable theme of a “new creation.”

Résumé

Le thème de la destruction est si commun dans l'art du vingtième siècle qu'on peut facilement faire l'erreur superficielle de rejeter une grande partie de l'art moderne comme ayant trait uniquement à la mort et au désespoir. Pourtant, une étude plus approfondie de cette période peut révéler qu'il y a aussi une fascination pour des sujets se rapportant à la naissance, au renouveau et aux nouveaux départs. Bien des formes d'art de notre siècle présentent une rupture profonde et voulue par rapport au passé et peuvent être comprises comme une tentative continue, de la part des artistes modernes, de création d'un langage visuel unique et sans précédent pour l'époque dans laquelle ils vivent. Cet article examine les oeuvres de quelques artistes du vingtième siècle, qu'ils soient ou non versés dans la connaissance de la Révélation Bahá'í afin de faire ressortir que plusieurs de ces artistes se sont sentis le besoin d'exprimer ce thème tranquille et cependant indubitable de la “nouvelle création.”

Resumen

El tema de la destrucción es tan común en el arte del siglo veinte que resulta muy fácil cometer el error de decir que el arte moderno trata solamente con i

muerte y la desesperación. Sin embargo, un estudio más detenido revela que siempre ha habido una fascinación con los temas del nacimiento, la renovación, y nuevos comienzos. Muchas de las formas artísticas de nuestro siglo muestran una profunda e intencionada ruptura con el pasado y puede ser interpretada como un intento continuo de parte de los artistas modernos de crear un lenguaje visual único e inaudito para la época en que vivimos. Este artículo mira las obras de algunos artistas del siglo veinte para mostrar que, tuvieran conciencia o no de la revelación Bahá'í, muchos de estos artistas han sido compelidos a expresar, de una manera silenciosa pero inequívoca, el tema de una "nueva creación."

In 1842, the English painter William Turner took his brush to the canvas to create an image of strange and compelling power. In his *Snowstorm, Steamboat off a Harbour's Mouth* (figure 1), Turner recorded the sensations he experienced when his ship was caught in a great snowstorm at sea. The artist had refused the captain's request to go below to protect himself from the power of the great blizzard and had asked that he be lashed to the mast of the ship to experience the full force of Nature's energy. If he survived the experience, the artist vowed to try to portray that awe-inspiring power as best he could in a painted canvas. Like some kind of modern-day Ulysses strapped to the mast of his ship, Turner dared to hear the siren song of the forces of the Universe and to feel their destructive power.



Figure 1. William Turner. *Snowstorm, Steamboat off a Harbour's Mouth*. 1842. Oil on canvas. 35¹/₂" x 47¹/₂". The Tate Gallery, London

In many ways, this painting *Snowstorm, Steamboat off a Harbour's Mouth* could be considered the first modern painting. Indeed, its themes of explorations of the unknown, of unleashed powers and disintegrating worlds would be repeated many times in the art of the twentieth century. This painting could also be understood as a prophetic one, for it seems both to mirror the dangerous and exhilarating journey humanity has embarked upon during the last century and a half and to function also as a forerunner of the vortex of new art movements born at the beginning of our own age. In these new movements (which include Futurism, Cubism, and Expressionism), artists would react to the great changes of the modern age by creating art works in which the surface of the canvas would be broken up, spatial conventions splintered to pieces, and the traditional elements of the human form and the landscape portrayed as dismembered shards tossed about by tornadoes of line and paint. From Picasso to Pollock, the old order of art would dissolve into fractured planes, vibrating atoms, and scattered marks, which would dance, sometimes grotesquely and sometimes harmoniously, in an electric configuration of pure energy across a thousand canvasses.

Turner's prophetic portrayal of the great storm that dissolved the elements of Nature down to their primal energies was painted just two years before the advent of the startling announcement of the Báb, a young man who arose in Shiraz, Iran, in 1844 to create a corresponding spiritual storm in Shiah Islam with the declaration that he was the Qá'im (the Promised One of Islam) and the Herald of a new age. The Báb was executed in 1850, but his prophecies of the coming of a great Teacher were fulfilled in the personage of Bahá'u'lláh. It is to Bahá'u'lláh's writings that we can look for an explanation of the tempestuous events of the birth of the modern age:

I testify that no sooner had the First Word proceeded, through the potency of Thy will and purpose, out of His mouth, and the First Call gone forth from His lips than the whole creation was revolutionized, and all that are in the heavens and all that are on earth were stirred to the depths. Through that Word the realities of all created things were shaken, were divided, separated, scattered, combined and reunited, disclosing, in both the contingent world and the heavenly kingdom, entities of a new creation, and revealing, in the unseen realms, the signs and tokens of Thy unity and oneness. Through that Call Thou didst announce unto all Thy servants the advent of Thy most great Revelation and the appearance of Thy most perfect Cause. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Bahá'í World Faith* 93)

Bahá'u'lláh further explains the upheavals of the last 150 years:

The world's equilibrium hath been upset through the vibrating influence of this most great, this new World Order. Mankind's ordered life hath been revolutionized through the agency of this unique, this wondrous System—the like of which mortal eyes have never witnessed. (*Gleanings* 136)

The birth-pangs of Bahá'u'lláh's new, world-embracing faith may be understood as having created pain and suffering in every realm of existence:

No sooner had that Revelation been unveiled to men's eyes than the signs of universal discord appeared among the peoples of the world, and commotion seized the dwellers of earth and heaven, and the foundations of all things were shaken. (*Bahá'í World Faith* 93)

Have modern artists from Turner onward been bearing unknowing witness to these "signs of universal discord" and to the renewed Revelation of God through whom the "realities of all created things were shaken"? Can the death throes of the old world be seen mirrored in the agonies, suffering, dislocation, and despair that appear in so much of twentieth-century art?

In writing of the effect of the coming of Christ upon the artists of his own day and beyond, Bahá'u'lláh explains:

The deepest wisdom which the sages have uttered, the profoundest learning which any mind hath unfolded, the arts which the ablest hands have produced, the influence exerted by the most potent of rulers, are but manifestations of the quickening power released by His [Christ's] transcendent, His all-pervasive, and resplendent Spirit. (*Gleanings* 85–86)

If we look at twentieth-century art with these words in mind, if we can accept that in the life and words of Bahá'u'lláh God has spoken again in history and that this "quickenning power" has brought about another miracle of Revelation, then we can indeed expect that the artists who worked at the beginning of this new age to have borne witness to both its destructive and creative powers. The theme of destruction of the old is there for all to see, for the tormented creations of many agonized hands cry out their pain to us from countless gallery walls. But there is also clearly a birth announcement, the message that those things which have been shaken and divided, separated and scattered have also recombined and reunited, and express the gestation of something new.

It is the intent of this article to suggest that a study of twentieth-century art can show that amidst the destruction and despair there is indeed this quiet but persistent theme of birth and new beginnings. Some artists who explored these themes were Bahá'ís, many were not. Even if they were unaware of the magnitude of the coming of the Bahá'í Revelation, there were artists who were sensitive not only to the death of the old order but also to the birth of something unprecedented from the ruins of an old way of life. Indeed, this theme of a new beginning runs quietly through twentieth-century art, persistent and unmistakable.

Understanding Abstract Art

Before we look at some examples of the themes of birth and renewal in the art of our century, it may be useful to discuss some aspects of abstract art.

Artworks without recognizable subjects taken from the natural world are often difficult for many observers to understand. Viewers sometimes feel lost without the traditional references to the visual world and the long agreed upon set of symbols that facilitated a communication between artists and their public. This break with tradition and recognizable order only compounds the confusion of the viewer who may have turned to art for consolation or for explanations in a rapidly changing world. In the artistic traditions of Western Europe, it had long been taught that the best art was that which mirrored nature.

If we widen our viewpoint, however, we can see that several art forms throughout history have been abstract in style. Early Islamic art, for example, was almost completely abstract in character. Figural illustrations were discouraged. Complex patterns represented either geometric or vegetal patterns, or a mixture of both. Calligraphy was also employed as an abstract pattern. Designs seemed to illustrate the creative power of God and represented the evolution of the physical realm into the plane of spirit. A similar use of patterns and designs can also be found in some traditions of African art where abstracted signs and symbols carried important messages of the spiritual realm. In African, Native American, and Aboriginal artistic traditions, an exact imitation of objects in the natural world was deliberately avoided, as art was thought of as embodying spiritual, not physical reality.

The arts of the early medieval period in Ireland also had an abstract phase. The beautiful illuminated manuscript pages from the pious hands of seventh-century Irish monks, for example, were nonobjective in character. Their intertwined designs were so energetic in their power that they almost leapt off the page. There were also abstractions in some examples of Japanese art. Zen Buddhist monks practiced a technique known as *haboku* or the “flung ink” technique. Prizing spontaneity, the monk would swiftly drop paint onto a silk scroll. A touch with a brush here and there produced a fleeting suggestion of a mountainscape rather than an exact rendition of it.

In European civilization, however, imitation of the world of the senses had reigned supreme for nearly 500 years. According to this tradition, the best artists were those whose paintings repeated the recognizable configurations of the physical world. The concept of abstract art had disappeared, and it was not until the twentieth century that it began to be reawakened. In fact, this very break from the traditions of the previous centuries is in itself an indicator that artists, perhaps beginning with Turner, sensed the momentous changes of the death throes of the old world order and were trying to create an art which was completely fresh and new.

Wassily Kandinsky and the “Revelation of the Spirit”

It is interesting to note that the artist usually credited with the first abstract paintings of the twentieth century developed them as an expression of the

spiritual rather than the material realm. This artist, a Russian painter named Wassily Kandinsky, felt that traditional art by its very nature as a reflection of the material world was not an adequate vehicle for the expression of an inner life. Art, like music, should be free to soar in the celestial realms unhampered by connections to the material plane.

In his famous treatise *On the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky writes:

A painter who finds no satisfaction in mere representation, however artistic, in his longing to express his inner life, cannot but envy the ease with which music, the most non-material of the arts today, achieves this end. He naturally seeks to apply the methods of music to his own art. (Kandinsky, *Spiritual* 19)

Kandinsky linked his desire for “musical” abstractions in his painting to his wish for the birth of a new spiritual movement that would replace the West’s obsession with the material world:

Our epoch is a time of tragic collisions between spirit and matter and of the downfall of a purely materialistic world view: for many people it is a time of terrible, inescapable vacuum, a time of enormous questions, for a few people it is a time of presentiment or of the precognition of the path of Truth. “He that hath ears let him hear.” (Cited in Heller, “Kandinsky and Traditions Apocalyptic” 21)

We have turned, for reasons obscure to us, away from the internal towards the external. And yet, perhaps we Westerners shall not, after all, have to wait too long before the same inner sound, so strangely silenced, reawakens within us and, sounding forth from the innermost depth, involuntarily reveals its affinity with the East—just as in the hearts of all peoples, in the now darkest depths of the spirit, there shall resound one universal sound, albeit presently inaudible to us, the sound of the spirit of man. (“Kandinsky” 20)

Where did Kandinsky get these ideas? We know that he had many connections to the Theosophical movement during this period (about 1912). The Theosophists emphasized the mystical truths that united all the world’s religions and had many things in common with the Bahá’í Faith. When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá spoke to the Theosophical Society, he said of the Bahá’ís and the Theosophists:

Their purposes are one, their desires one, and spiritual susceptibilities are common to both. Their attention is devoted to the divine Kingdom; they partake alike of its bounty. (*The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 156)

Through his connection with the Theosophists, Kandinsky seemed to be very aware of the coming of a new age and was compelled to express it in his art. He quoted the Theosophists in speaking of “a new torchbearer of truth who will find the minds of men prepared for his message” (Kandinsky, *Spiritual* 13).

Kandinsky’s belief in the coming of a new age appeared to have been even more specific than this. Recent research on the source of his ideas has shown that he was particularly influenced by the thought of a twelfth-century mystic Joachim of Fiore (Heller, “Kandinsky” 21–23). According to this thinker, Western history is divided into three epochs or “revelations,” reflecting the Trinity in Christian thought. The revelation of the Father expressed itself through the Old Testament, and that of the Son was reflected in the Christian era. The Third Revelation, “that of the spirit” was believed to be nigh. After much calculation of biblical prophecy, Joachim of Fiore had been convinced that the new Revelation of the Spirit would occur in the year 1260. His thoughts had an influence during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and then lost their impact as the promise did not seem to be fulfilled.

During the mid-nineteenth century, however, there was a strong revival of apocalyptic beliefs. William Miller’s teachings about the Return of Christ between 1843 and 1845 were reflected in several other messianic movements. It is the belief of the Bahá’ís, of course, that these prophecies were fulfilled with the advent of the Báb, who declared his mission in 1844, or the year 1260 in the Muslim calendar. The great Revelation of the Spirit *had* appeared.

As far as can be determined, Kandinsky did not know of the Bahá’í Revelation. Perhaps his disappointment in the failure of the great spiritual age to appear led to his turning away from apocalyptic themes in his later career. Let us look, however, at some of Kandinsky’s works created in the years 1909–1913, when he was the most obsessed with the concept of the coming of a new age.

At first glance, a work like *Study for Composition II* (1909–10) (figure 2) appears to be totally non-objective. However, recent studies of Kandinsky’s



Figure 2. Wassily Kandinsky. *Study for Composition II*. 1909–10. Oil on canvas. 38³/₈" x 51⁵/₈". The Solomon P. Guggenheim Museum, New York

works have shown that they are permeated with a special symbolism, a symbolism that revolves around his fascination concerning the theme of the Apocalypse. In this work, the painting is divided into two parts. On the left side, there is a scene of devastation. Houses and towers topple, while waves crash in upon the landscape. Ghosts rise from their graves and float through the chaos. We know from Kandinsky's notes that this scene illustrates the Apocalypse, the end of time when the dead are called forth from their graves. On the right side of the painting, the scene changes to a garden of paradise. Here, couples recline under languid trees, and the earth is filled with bounty. A group of four riders flees from the chaotic scene of devastation to the quiet garden. The garden of paradise has long been a symbol of the heavenly realm. Here, it represents the "New Earth" and the "Heavenly Jerusalem," which will appear after the death of the old era and the founding of Joachim of Fiore's Revelation of the Spirit.

There is an uncanny parallel between these modern visions of the Apocalypse and passages from the Bahá'í writings. In speaking of his own coming, Bahá'u'lláh writes:

Say: The heavens have been folded together, and the earth is held within His grasp. . . . Say: The shout hath been raised, and the people have come forth from their graves, and arising, are gazing around them. (*Gleanings* 41)

Speed out of your sepulchers. How long will ye sleep? The second blast hath been blown on trumpet. On whom are ye gazing? This is your Lord, the God of Mercy. (*Gleanings* 44)

The right side of the painting—Paradise—recalls 'Abdu'l-Bahá's commentary on the eleventh chapter of the Revelation of St. John:

In the day of the manifestation of the Lord of Hosts, and at the epoch of the divine cycle of the Omnipotent which is promised and mentioned in all the books and writings of the Prophets—in that day of God, the Spiritual and Divine Kingdom will be established, and the world will be renewed; a new spirit will be breathed into the body of creation; the season of the divine spring will come; the clouds of mercy will rain; the sun of reality will shine; the life-giving breeze will blow; the world of humanity will wear a new garment; the surface of the earth will be a sublime paradise. . . . ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 56–57)

Although Kandinsky appears to have been unaware of the Bahá'í Revelation, as a sensitive artist he appeared tuned to the vibrations of the new Day of God. His sense of the passing of an old order and founding of a new one is passionately expressed in his art.



Figure 3. Kasimir Malevich. *Suprematist Composition: White on White*. 1918. Oil on canvas 31¹/₄" x 39¹/₄". Museum of Modern Art, New York

Images of Birth and New Beginnings

The phenomenon of a sensitivity toward the birth of something new appears in works by other artists who, also, were apparently unaware of the advent of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. A compatriot of Kandinsky's, the Russian artist Kasimir Malevich, was also profoundly interested in art as a carrier of spiritual ideas. He wanted to purify art of all its old traditions, to wash it clean, to sweep it free of the cobwebs of the old ways of thought and to liberate it from expectations. Painting in the few short years of artistic freedom just after the Russian Revolution, Malevich insisted on art works that were pure and undefiled. In his unusual work entitled *White on White* (1918) (figure 3), the artist expressed the new way of thought. Malevich wrote that the airplane was an instrument of the coming of a new consciousness and a way of life. He felt that the flying machine had “awakened the soul from its long sleep in the catacombs of reason” and that a new life “somewhere between earth and sky was waiting for us.” “Sail forth,” he wrote, “the white free chasm of infinity lies before us!” (Russell, *Meanings* 242). *White on White* seems to be a visual metaphor for the new exhilaration of a vision that is no longer held captive by gravity. Freed from restraints, the square shape floats in the ether, just as flight has freed human beings from narrow, earth-bound ideas. The painting also seems to represent a new beginning, a clean slate, pure and ready for the new age:

Try not to repeat yourself either in an icon or in a picture or in words. If something in your action reminds you of . . . the past, the voice of new birth tells me: wipe it off, remain silent. . . . (Quoted in Lipsey, *Art of Our Own* 135)

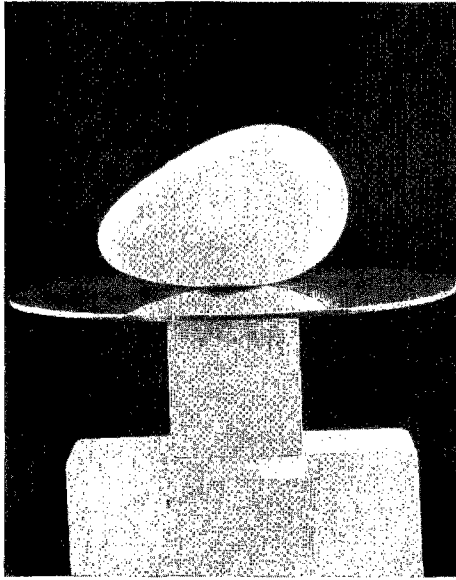


Figure 4. Constantine Brancusi. *The Beginning of the World*. 1924. Polished marble. 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 11 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ ". Musée national d'art moderne, Paris

A Romanian sculptor, Constantine Brancusi, also explored the simplicity of the pared-down, cleansed image. In his *Beginning of the World* (1924) (figure 4) he repeated Malevich's whiteness and insistence on purity. The solid marble shape holds limitless possibilities. It has the potential of the just fertilized egg, or on a more cosmic level, the compact Universe just before the moment of the Big Bang. This is the egg of Brahman, which in Hindu tradition contains all the matter of existence before the cosmos is created. Silent, yet powerful, it stands at the very beginning of things. "There has been no art yet," writes Brancusi, "art has just begun" (quoted in Lipsey, *Art of our Own* 243).

A different type of image of new birth was being developed in the Swiss city of Zurich in 1917. Here, a group of artists who named their movement "Dada" were experimenting with a complete break with the dead weight of the past. The spirit of Dada was exemplified in an artwork by Marcel Duchamp who had painted a moustache on a reproduction of the Mona Lisa. Using humor as an effective component in their art, the Dada artists explored the absurdities of our dependence upon the past and our inability to understand the time in which we live. As in T.S. Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," the Dadaists felt disgust with those who "come and go talking of Michelangelo," and who were completely out of touch with the reality of their own lives.

One of the group, Jean Arp, became obsessed with a single image of birth, the shape of the human navel. These he painted over and over, even creating a

line of them down the alley to the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich where Dada was founded. He writes:

We are looking for an art based on fundamentals, one which will cure the madness of the age. We want a new order of things to restore the balance between heaven and hell. (Quoted in Russell, *Meanings* 180)

Dada came to birth during the First World War, as artists attempted to adjust to the magnitude of suffering brought about by the death of an old age. Although the Dada movement was too anarchistic to survive long, many of its concepts were carried forward by the Surrealist artists who worked in the period between World Wars I and II. An intriguing image of birth was developed by the Surrealist Joan Miro who used strange hallucinatory shapes to express dream-like themes. In his *The Birth of the World* (1924) (figure 5) Miro presents us with primal geometric shapes like circles, triangles, and repeated lines. These float suspended in a kind of smoky, ethereal environment that seems to be coalescing into further shapes. The colors of the geometric shapes stand out against the darkness of the background, which is gradually shot through with light. This matrix from which the shapes are born is reminiscent of the photographs of the vast sections of star dust in space from which new suns are constantly brought into being.



Figure 5. Joan Miro. *The Birth of the World* 1924. Oil on canvas. 98³/₄" x 78³/₄". The Museum of Modern Art, New York

It is interesting to note that prior to the twentieth century, the most common image of birth in art had been the Nativity scenes celebrating the Coming of Christ. The Nativity imagery fell out of favor in the progressive secularization of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and it has only been in the twentieth century that the image of birth has reasserted itself. These modern reinterpretations of the Nativity theme are more cosmic in their scope and expand the ancient subject matter to explore the theme of the entire universe renewed.

Images of Destruction and Creation in the 1940s and 1950s

The horrors of the Second World War only served to intensify the need to end the world's travail and to bring forth the child of the new order. Many artists abandoned themselves to the terror and, deprived of an understanding of the age they lived in, became mired in themes of destruction and materialism. The dark character of the age of transition dulled their sensitivities and sucked them into a whirlpool of despair.

A moving presentation of the chaotic and undirected energy of twentieth-century life can be found in some of the post-war work of Jackson Pollock. As in the work *Lucifer*, painted in 1947, (two years after the first atomic explosion), one senses that in this particular work, Pollock may have been expressing the theme that a monstrous evil has been set loose upon the world (figure 6). Existence without meaning and order given by a revealed religion becomes an interweaving of senseless threads, a pattern with no purpose.

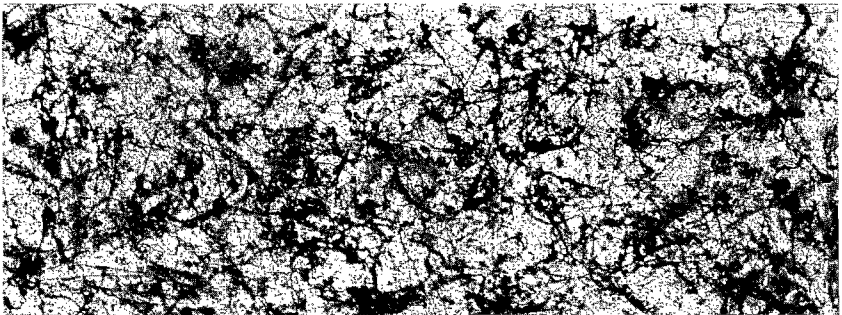


Figure 6. Jackson Pollock. *Lucifer*. 1947. Oil, aluminum paint, and enamel on canvas. 3'5" x 8' x 9". Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Harry W. Anderson

Pulsating with creative power, Pollock’s works have become visual metaphors of energy without order. Influenced by the automatic writing of the Surrealists, Pollock made himself an open channel for the welling up of the spontaneous expression of the subconscious, which has not been filtered through the “editing” and “ordering” of the higher levels of the conscious mind. He saw his painterly expression as a kind of liberation from such control. Pollock’s paintings were like charged energy fields, and he likened them in their magical powers to Navajo sandpaintings used for healing rituals. Yet, if one compares a Navajo painting, with its ordered structure and traditional forms, with Pollock’s loops, skeins, and explosions of paint, the element of chance within his compositions speaks of a totally different sense of the experience of the universe. It is a central human trait to attempt to make a coherent structure of the millions of sense impressions that make up our universe, and art is one of the ways to express that constructed order. Pollock may be presenting us with a kind of image of the human mind at birth before it has been ordered and formed by language and sensate experiences. He was willing to forego that innate human drive to make sense out of things in order to carry forward Turner’s explorations of the horrifying powers of chaos. It was Pollock, too, who used his art to stare directly in the face the possibility that the universe is ruled by chance rather than by design. Driven by alcoholism and his inner demons, Pollock died in a car crash at the age of forty-four. Again, we can read Bahá’u’lláh’s words that with the coming of this Age “the whole creation was revolutionized” that “all created things were shaken, were divided, separated, scattered, combined and reunited . . .” (*Bahá’í World Faith* 93). Jackson Pollock daringly revealed the division and scattering. His personal psychic pain was that the ultimate reunification was for him veiled.

Mark Tobey had another viewpoint on the upheavals of the modern age. He became a Bahá’í in 1918, and the principles of his belief guided both his art and his life. Understandably, his art works are filled with reference to the process of birth. In the painting *Threading Light* (1942) (figure 7), Mark Tobey used trails of white light to link together compartments with human figures in them. As the luminous lines of light weave through the painting, they are like filaments that bind together a towering edifice, presenting to us a painting which is reminiscent of the façade of a great building. Within this façade, different figures slowly emerge. They appear to represent different religious traditions; some wear turbans while others appear to be biblical figures from the Judeo-Christian world. Tobey described the use of light in his paintings as “a unifying idea which flows through compartmented units of light, bringing a dynamic to men’s minds ever expanding their energies toward a larger reality” (quoted in Janis, *Abstract* 87). The painting appears to give visual form to the Bahá’í belief in an “ever-advancing civilization” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* 215). Each generation of humanity builds upon the accomplishments of the last, and history is illuminated

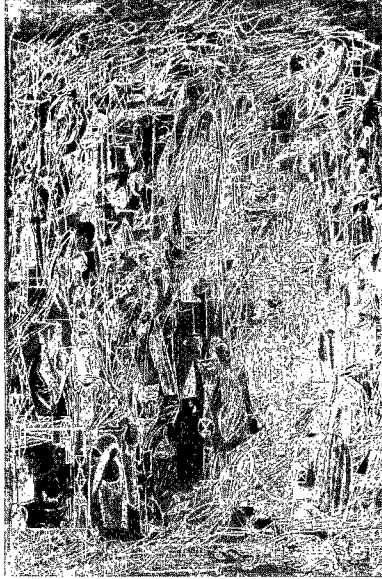


Figure 7. Mark Tobey. *Threading Light*. 1942. Tempera. $29\frac{3}{8}$ " x $19\frac{1}{2}$ "
Museum of Modern Art, New York

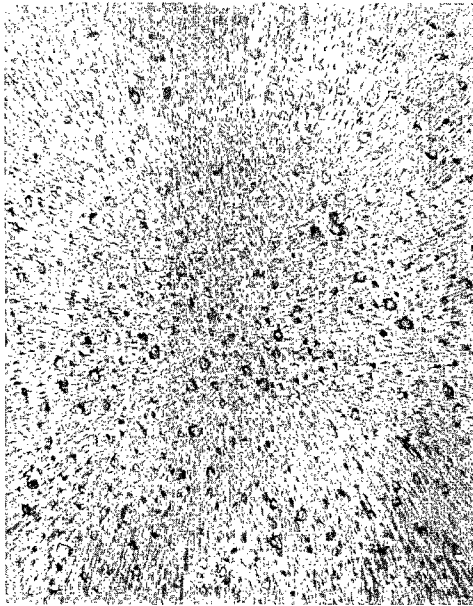


Figure 8. Mark Tobey. *New Genesis*. 1958. Tempera. $10\frac{3}{4}$ " x $8\frac{1}{4}$ ". Stanford
University Museum of Art, Stanford, California (Gift of Joyce Lyon Dahl)

by the light of the Holy Spirit, which energizes and guides human affairs. From time to time, extraordinary figures like Moses, Christ, Muḥammad, or Bahá’u’lláh clarify and intensify our relationship to this outpouring of divine Light, and we are ready to build a new story on the edifice of human civilization.

In the 1950s, Tobey continued his fascination with the theme of new beginnings. Approaching it in a more abstracted manner, Tobey created works like *Burst of Spring* and *New Genesis* (1958) (figure 8). In the latter work, the sense of cosmic explosion is overwhelming. It is as if the silent egg suggested in Brancusi’s marble sculpture has now exploded, and the basic matter of the cosmos is impelled outward by a force greater than any the imagination of the human mind could encompass. The universe is born anew, and all matter is transformed by the energy of this primal act of creation.

Another artist who explored images of new beginnings during a historical period of great destruction was the American artist Augustus Vincent Tack. His strange visions of what has been called the “landscape of the spirit” united broken and jagged forms of light and pastel colors into restless compositions of flickering and energized shapes. In a mural-size canvas of 1943–44, Tack used his distinctive forms to create an image he entitled *Time and Timelessness (The Spirit of Creation)* (figure 9). Created just 100 years after the Báb’s momentous announcement, which marked the end of the Prophetic Age and the beginning of the Age of Fulfillment, Tack’s vision may be interpreted as bearing unknown witness to the birth of a new cycle in the history of humanity.

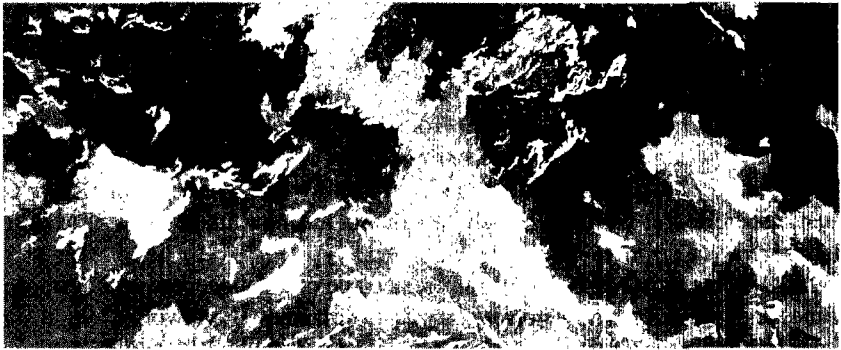


Figure 9. Augustus Vincent Tack. *Time and Timelessness (The Spirit of Creation)*. 1943–44. Oil on canvas. 39³/₁₆" x 85¹/₄". The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

Barnett Newman was yet another American artist working during the 1940s and '50s who struggled in his works to suggest the process of birth. Choosing simple, archetypal forms for his work, Newman explored the mysteries of creation and the genesis of being. He attempted to express the primal moment

when matter was separated from spirit and the world came into existence. In works like *Genetic Moment* (1948), the viewer can sense a new creation, when the formless coalesces into forms and the universe of energy and potential springs into being. In other works, like *Adam* (1951–52) (figure 10), Newman continued his personal obsession with the theme of creation and new beginnings by an extreme simplification of forms. Rays of light split the dark canvas suggesting earthly matter now invaded by spirit. This is the very moment that divine energy transforms the man of dust, Adam, illuminating pure matter with intellect and spirit. As explained by Thomas Hess, the single stripe or “zip” as Newman called it, is “a complex symbol in the purest sense of Genesis itself. It is an act of division, a gesture of separation, as God separated light from darkness, with a line drawn in the void” (Hess, *Newman* 56).

Hess also comments that this irruption of light into matter could also refer to “a meditation on the Messianic secret, on rebirth, new life” (*Newman* 53). One is reminded of the following passage quoted in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, “Behold, a light hath shone forth out of the morn of eternity, and lo, its waves have penetrated the inmost reality of all men” (*Gleanings* 178–79).¹

Our *fin de siècle*: Women’s Voices and the Return to Humanity’s Earliest Artistic Roots

The last decades of the twentieth century have produced a number of artists who, in their search for new beginnings, have returned for inspiration to humanity’s earliest art forms. These works are an homage to an ancient time when the divine power was revered and the earth was filled with magic and mystery. The painters of the ancient caves of Lascaux, the builders of Stonehenge, the carvers of goddess figurines celebrating the primal power of fertility and birth have all become sources for the twentieth-century artist (Lippard, *Overlay*). The spirits of those earliest of artists at the beginnings of human society have been called upon as guides for the artists of our time who must also reflect a world in which “all things are now made new” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings* 253).

In 1970, the artist Robert Smithson created one of the most powerful examples of these new works of art, which are often categorized as “Earthworks.” Smithson chose as his site the Great Salt Lake in Utah, and here he built a great *Spiral Jetty* of rock and stone that extended out into the lake (figure 11). The spiral image itself is one of the oldest symbols of creative force and primal energy. It is echoed in nature in the form of whirlpools, of hurricanes, of budding plants, and of

1. For a further discussion of the themes of Barnett Newman and another artist, Mark Rothko, see Ross Woodman, “Bahá'u'lláh's Influence on the New York School of Painting: The ‘Unapprehended Inspiration’ of Newman and Rothko,” *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* (1991): 67–89.

"New Creation" in Twentieth-Century Art

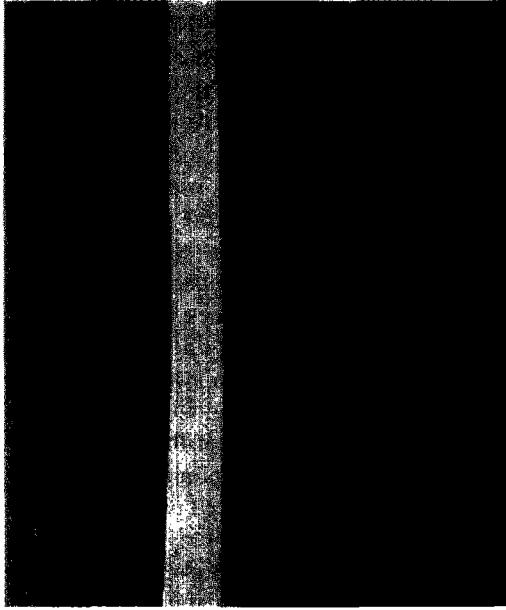


Figure 10. Barnett Newman. *Adam*. 1951–52. Oil on canvas. 95⁵/₈" x 79⁷/₈"
The Tate Gallery, London

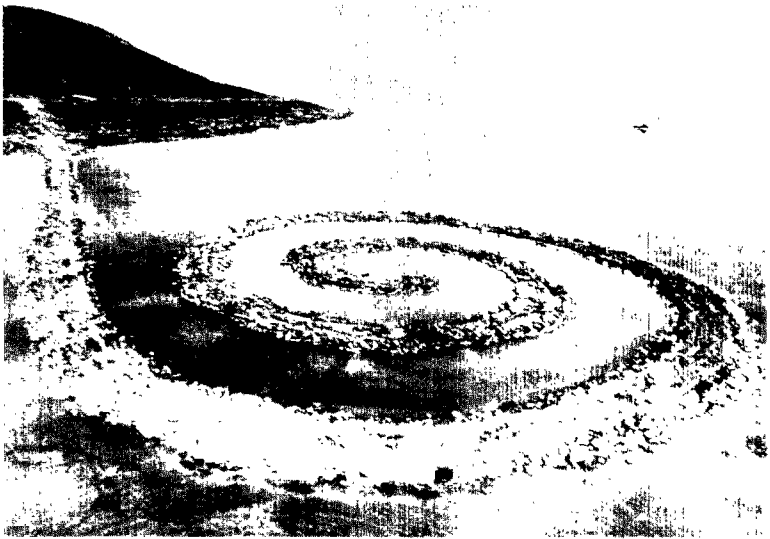


Figure 11. Robert Smithson. *Spiral Jetty*. 1970. Great Salt Lake, Utah

galaxies. The spiral appears on the pottery of the ancient Chinese and the Minoans, and is carved into the stones of the Neolithic burial sites in Ireland. The spiral can not only be associated with death but also be interpreted as a symbol of the creative energy of life and of rebirth. The *Spiral Jetty* itself has now become part of the earth and partakes of its cycles. At the present moment, the waters of the Great Salt Lake have risen several feet, and the jetty is under the surface. As geological changes occur, it will once again rise out of the lake altered forever in shape as it has responded to the currents of the water.

In creating this earthwork, Smithson seemed to be turning back to the earliest monuments known from human history. Immense drawings upon the surface of the earth such as the Nazca lines in Peru as well as alignments of stones like those in the rows of uprights at Carnac or the circles at Avebury and Stonehenge were inspirations for Smithson's works. By taking his art out of the gallery systems and creating a statement that cannot be bought or sold, Smithson made a powerful protest against the commercialization of art. He gave art back its old role as definer of aspirations, a symbol of the intangible, and a reflector of beliefs. Perhaps he showed us that in our new world the artist will once again become the purveyor of the mysteries of the divine essence and that art will bear the message that "within every atom are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that most great Light" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 100).

The late twentieth century has also been a time in which the artistic voices of women have begun to be heard. Their approaches are new, and during the last two decades women artists have questioned the very nature of more traditional expectations concerning the role of art and the artist in society, the types of materials used, the hierarchy of fine arts over "minor" arts, and the subject matters chosen. A number of these new artists have also returned to very early art for inspiration, and they too have exalted the image of birth and new beginnings. In the early 1970s Judy Chicago was one of the first artists to attempt to find a "woman's voice." Her best-known work *The Dinner Party* is a rediscovery and a celebration of the lost contributions of women to history. This room-size assemblage also broke with artistic traditions in that it was a group project requiring the contributions of many people. This display of cooperation differed from the traditional view of a male artist struggling alone for individual inspiration. Another group work sponsored by Judy Chicago is her *Birth Project*. The work consists of several hundred embroidered hangings and banners that display the themes of creation, fertility, and birth. The first works on this theme explore the mystery of the creation of the world (figure 12), while later panels focus on the theme of women giving birth. In her figures of pregnant women in varying phases of the birth process, Chicago and her fellow artists do not shrink from a representation of the pain of the experience—a subject that has been rare in art created by men.



Figure 12. Judy Chicago. *Creation of the World* 1980–81. 8" x 16". From *The Birth Project*, 1981–84. Embroidered by Pamela Nesbit. The Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (Gift of Through the Flower Corporation)

The new materials, the emphasis on a group rather than individual product, the introduction of new angles to old subjects based on female rather than male experience all exhibit the radical change in art that has occurred in our century and suggest some of the ways in which future art may develop. The art works developed by women in the last two decades suggest that art will be profoundly influenced by the vision of a society in which men and women are equal:

The world in the past has been ruled by force, and man has dominated over woman by reason of his more forceful and aggressive qualities both of body and mind. But the balance is already shifting; force is losing its dominance, and mental alertness, intuition, and the spiritual qualities of love and service, in which woman is strong, are gaining ascendancy. Hence the new age . . . will be an age in which the masculine and feminine elements of civilization will be more evenly balanced. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in Esslemont, *New Era* 149)

Conclusion

There is not yet such a thing as “Bahá'í art,” yet, we can see that in both the chaos and in the exhilarating potential of the times in which we live, that many artists, whether they have been aware of the source of their inspiration or not, have been sensitive to the advent of the new Revelation. This influence may have been directly known, as in the case of Mark Tobey and any number of fine artists who are working today with a direct inspiration from the Bahá'í writings. But there are many artists of the twentieth century who were unaware of the power of the Bahá'í Revelation yet were stimulated by an “unapprehended inspiration” to bear witness to the “new creation” which they instinctively understood was forming all around them. It is these twentieth-century artists

who have returned to their ancient roles as prophets and seers and sensed that although we are at the very end of something old, the future surely impels us toward something profoundly new.

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