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On the Paintings of Frithjof Schuon

by Michael Pollack

Source: *Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty* (Abodes, 1992)

The following is taken from the "Introduction" to Schuon's book of paintings and sketches, Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty, and was written by the editor of the collection, Michael Pollack.

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Frithjof Schuon has long been known as the preeminent living representative of the *Sophia Perennis*, that spring of spiritual wisdom which underlies and penetrates all of the world's orthodox religions; over the past fifty years he has written more than twenty books, now translated into many languages. In addition to his writings, Schuon has painted for most of his life, though it was not until recently, with the publication of *The Feathered Sun* (World Wisdom, 1990)—which includes nineteen color reproductions of his paintings on American Indian themes—that a collection of his artwork has come into the public light.

Frithjof Schuon is not a painter who is interested in metaphysics; he is a metaphysician who from time to time produces a painting. This distinction is essential because his fundamental vocation is the perennial wisdom as it is expressed in his written works, whereas his art appears rather as an expression of the aesthetic, psychological or moral dimension of the *Philosophia Perennis*. In other words, Schuon is interested not only in metaphysical principles, but also—by way of consequence—in their cosmic and human radiation; which means, not that he intentionally puts this or that archetype or symbolism into a painting—which in fact he does not—but simply that his spiritual insight, or let us say his contemplative mind, manifests itself in his artistic productions.

The subject of Schuon's art is on the one hand the Plains Indian world, and on the other hand the mystery of cosmic and human femininity; Goethe's "Eternal Feminine" (*das Ewig-Weibliche*) or the Hindu *Shakti*. The first subject has its roots in his affinity with the fascinating world of Red Indian heroism and mysticism; the second subject of his art—sacred femininity—has its roots in metaphysics and cosmology; one could also say, in a more relative sense, in Schuon's affinity with Hinduism.

It is essential to understand that Schuon as a painter is not interested in originality and innovation; he is fascinated by the subject matter alone, its origin being what he observed among the Indians or an inner vision of spiritual realities. As for style, Schuon applies the general rules of traditional pictorial art, the first principle being that a painting must take into account the flatness and immobility of the surface; it should not represent three-dimensional space nor a too accidental and hence fragmentary movement. Schuon has an affinity with Hindu art and Christian icons, and also, in a more secondary way, he accepts—at least partially—the techniques of a van Gogh, a Gauguin, a Hodler, or a Covarrubias. We should also mention that Schuon likes to repeat his subjects, which fact derives from his interest or fascination with them; it would be superficial and pedantic to reproach the painter for this kind of monotony, all the more so in that traditional art always has the tendency to repeat the same motifs, thus to unfold their potentialities.

In this collection are images of the White Buffalo Cow Woman who brought the Sacred Pipe to the Lakota Indians; we may add that the headdresses she wears in some of Schuon's paintings, or other details, have a symbolic import and do not mean that the heavenly person actually appeared in that way.

Let us mention here an opinion of a French author: the feathered crown of the Red Indians is the most majestic headdress the human genius ever conceived. In fact, the Plains Indian genius is like a combination of the buffalo, the eagle and the sun, symbolically speaking; earth and heaven, and between them the messenger of the gods.

As Schuon writes in one of his books, "The Indian world signifies first and foremost the reading of the primordial doctrine in the phenomena of Nature—each man reads what he can understand—and the experiencing of Nature as the holy, primordial Home that everywhere manifests the Great Spirit and everywhere is filled with Him; and this consciousness gives the Red Man his dignity, composed of reverence for Nature and of self-domination; it also throws light on the singular majesty of his artistically richly-accented appearance, in which eagle and sun combine and which, in the archetypal realm, belongs to the divine prototypes."

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When the question was broached of publishing Schuon's paintings, he at first was rather reluctant because he was concerned that such a publication might detract from the image of his intellectual and spiritual identity; for, let us repeat, the main accent of his message is spiritual and not artistic. However, because Schuon's art also contains in its way a spiritual message—since his doctrinal message finds a spiritually transparent expression in his art—he granted permission.

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Some biographical information seems to be indispensable here. Frithjof Schuon was born in 1907 in Basle, Switzerland, of German parents. Already in his boyhood he was interested in the world religions and their cultures. Upon the early death of his father, he went to Paris where he worked and studied for a few years, before undertaking a number of trips to North Africa, the Near East and India in view of contacting spiritual authorities and gathering material for his writings. It was in 1932 that he met the celebrated Shaykh Ahmed Al-'Alawi in Algeria; and he met the French philosopher and orientalist René Guénon during his visits to Egypt in 1938 and 1939. After World War II, having married the daughter of a Swiss diplomat, Schuon obtained Swiss nationality. Later he traveled to the American West in order to study the religion of the Plains Indians in whom he had always had a deep interest. As Schuon writes in one of his letters "My first paintings portrayed two Red Indian women, one clothed and the other naked; since then I have more than once repeated this theme, as it signifies the antithesis between sacred form and sacred content, or between the veiling and the unveiling of the holy. Besides purely narrative Indian pictures I often painted the sage—or the masculine nature of wisdom—in the form of an old Indian chief; I often represented him as the center of a council. My paintings of women represented the complement to this, namely beauty, with all the virtues that go with it; my starting point here—in these as in other pictures—was not a deliberate symbolism, but simply a reality that flowed forth from my nature; the meaning was prefigured in my inward being, and did not lie in my conscious intention." During his journeys to America he stayed for some time with various tribes, and in 1959 he was officially adopted into the Sioux nation (a diary of these travels can be found in *The Feathered Sun*). Our author is convinced that this ethnic group, the cultural and spiritual world of the Red Indians, has been seriously underestimated and that it offers a message of Virgin Nature and primordial wisdom which in principle can be helpful for mankind of our time; and this is one of the reasons why the Indian genius entered into our author's art.

Let us repeat that the fundamental meaning of Schuon's message is the presence of the sacred in every beauty. As Schuon writes: "What I seek to express in my paintings—and indeed I cannot express anything other—is the Sacred combined with Beauty, thus, spiritual attitudes and virtues of soul. And the vibration that emanates from the paintings must lead inward." As Plato expressed it: "Beauty is the splendor of Truth."