

The following pages are taken from the "Preface" by editor Catherine Schuon to *Art from the Sacred to the Profane*, a collection of writings by her husband, Frithjof Schuon, on sacred art.
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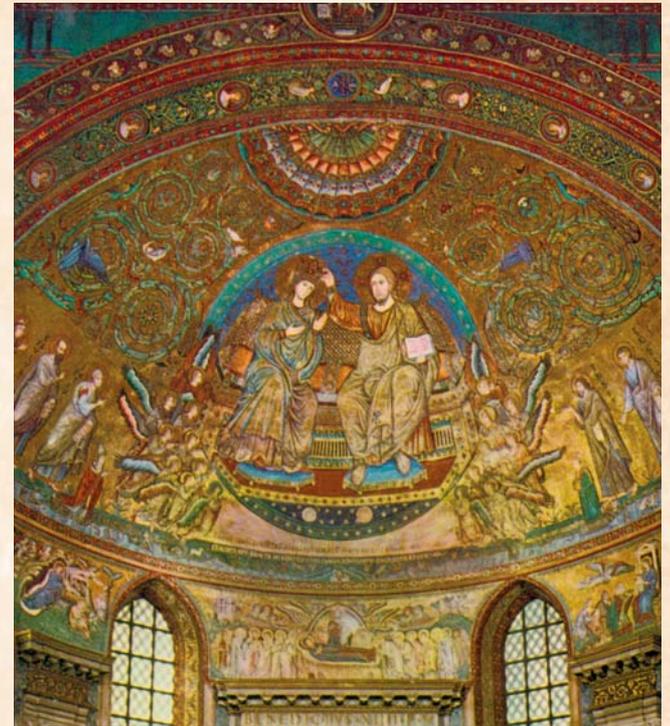
2. Entrance hall of the Sainte Chapelle, Paris, 13th century

Preface

From my earlier years I was always attracted to Gothic or Romanesque churches and I would not hesitate to walk several miles to attend Sunday services in these sanctuaries. Now my grandmother, who was a great art lover and admired almost every art (except surrealism), wanted to widen my horizon and get me out of my “narrow-mindedness” by inviting me to Rome when I was twenty. There again I was especially captivated by the beautiful Byzantine mosaics in the old churches and lamented the Baroque or Renaissance entrances and statues that had been added to them. The Church of Saint Peter, although one might be impressed by its dimensions, left me completely cold and in the Sistine Chapel I was rather horrified by the painting of the Last Judgment and felt sorry for Michelangelo that he had to decorate the ceiling with his muscular biblical personages while lying on his back [see ills. 91-92]. I am not denying that Michelangelo was a genius, but would it not have been more appropriate for a church to leave the blue ceiling with golden stars, as it was before? And as it still is in many old churches and especially in the entrance hall of the Sainte Chapelle in Paris where one is immediately seized by reverential marveling? The whole Vatican seemed to me more like a museum of paintings and sculptures than a sanctuary, so little there was conducive to prayer or recollection.

These were my impressions, but I never asked myself: why is that so? And I thought, like everybody else, that this was just my personal, even if limited, taste; until I read the first of Frithjof Schuon’s books, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, where the chapter on art made everything clear to me; and then of course, living and traveling with him was a consistent application of the principles and criteria he had laid out, a constant discernment between truth and error, the beautiful and the ugly, the acceptable and the unacceptable, on all planes.

Thus, when Michael Fitzgerald—Chairman of World Wisdom—asked me to prepare a book on art with texts by my husband, I was delighted to do so. But since I was restricted in the number of pages and the size of the book,



3. Mosaic of the apse, Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome, 6th century



4. Mosaic of the apse, Santa Maria in Trastevere, Rome, 12th century

not all the different arts of the world could be given special attention; however, separate chapters on the arts of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism seemed necessary because of the amount of writings that Schuon devoted to the art of these religions.

This was not as simple as one might think, since Schuon often writes in the same chapter or even in the same paragraph about the various arts, so that I had to carefully select sentences or passages from different works to accomplish my aim.

Also, when re-reading his books, I came upon precious passages related to beauty and the sense of the sacred which could not be omitted, and others on poetry, music, and dance, and finally on the less thought-of arts of dress and ambience. So, a chapter on each of these is here included.

As for the illustrations, I wished to illustrate as far as possible everything Schuon is referring to; in this, the innumerable documents and books he had accumulated during his long life were a great help.

A last remark: Schuon often quotes in a note a particular masterpiece or some little-known work of art seemingly unrelated to the specific subject treated, but which in fact corroborates a point he makes in the main text. Thus, in the same section the reader will sometimes find quite unexpected illustrations, or a work of traditional sacred art confronted with a naturalistic work of art for comparison (as can be seen right here in the Preface). At any rate, in order to understand the arrangement of the illustrations one ought to read the text.

I hope that this book will help the reader to learn more about the various kinds of art and to open his heart to the irreplaceable beauty of traditional and sacred art.

CATHERINE SCHUON



5. Michelangelo, *The Last Judgment*, Sistine Chapel, Rome, 1537-1541