



# The Mystery of Modern Art

## Esotericism, Magic, and Spiritualism among Contemporary Artists

Massimo Introvigne

Museum of Morbid Anatomy, Brooklyn

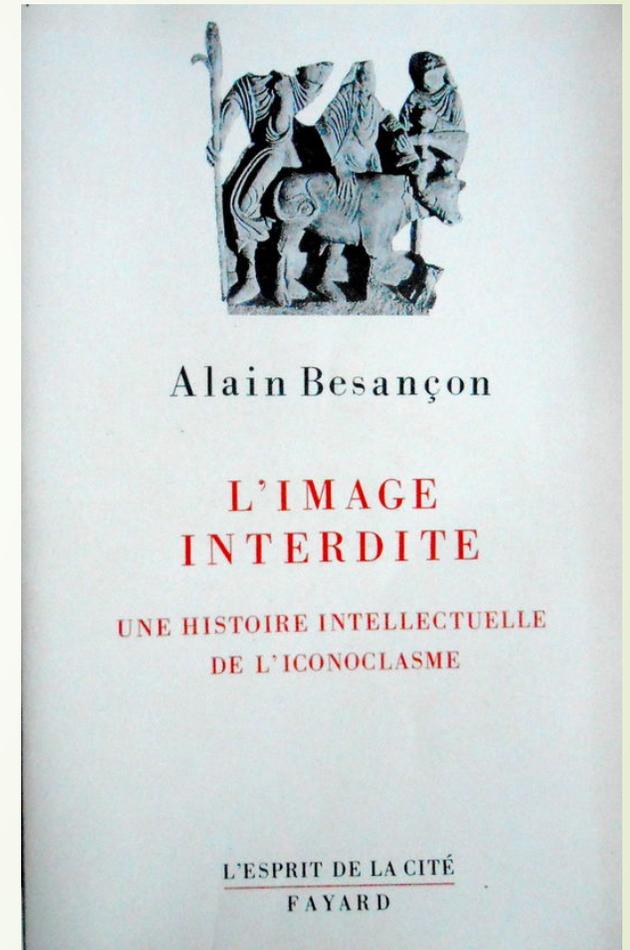
November 2, 2016

Above: Spirit art by Madge Gill (1882-1961)

# Besançon and *The Forbidden Image*



- ▶ One of the first books where sociology of religion met history of art was *The Forbidden Image: An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm*, published by French social historian Alain Besançon in 1994



# Iconoclasm vs Iconodulism

- ▶ The controversial book argued that the opposition between iconoclasm (i.e., the idea that the sacred should not be represented visually) and iconodulism (i.e., support for sacred images) defines Western art history



# What Is Iconoclasm?

- ▶ The terminology dates back to the Byzantine iconoclastic riots of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, but Besançon's idea of iconoclasm is not identical with dictionary definitions of the same word. For him, iconoclasm is not against visual arts and may even promote them. It only excludes from the field of art the representation of God and divine spirits or beings



Coin of Byzantine Emperor Leo III (685-741). This great iconoclast at least was not against representing *himself*

# Modern Art and Iconoclasm



- Besançon also argues that iconoclasm is a distinctive trait of “modernity,” which he defines as the post-Enlightenment Western culture, and abstract art is the most mature fruit of a process where art progressively loses all its connection with religion

Left: *Neurasthenia* (1908), by Italian Futurist (and Theosophist) Arnaldo Ginna (1890-1982) one of the first European abstract paintings

# Modern Art *against* Religion?

- ▶ Besançon is not the only author to regard modern art as intrinsically irreligious. Certainly, there are modern artists vocally materialist or Marxist. But who would deny that this *Pietà* (1899) by Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890) does express genuine religious feelings?



# Matisse and the Rosary Chapel



- Or that the Rosary Chapel in Vence, France, designed, together with its liturgical vests, between 1949 and 1951 by Henri Matisse (1869-1954) manifests the religious interests of an artist who remains, on the other hand, a non-believer?

# Rothko and the Houston Chapel



- ▶ And Houston's Ecumenical Chapel, opened in 1971 and designed by Mark Rothko (1903-1970), had as its purpose, according to the artist himself, to generate a “deep religious experience“ in its visitors



# Modern Art and Religion/Spirituality

We will examine three points:

- Modern art and traditional religions
- Modern art and new religious or esoteric movements
- Modern art as a new religion

# 1. Modern Art and Traditional Religions



- Several modern artists were devoted Christians. Dutch painter Jan Verkade (1848-1946, left), a member of the Paris group known as the Nabis, became, after an esoteric passage, a Benedictine monk

# Maurice Denis (1870-1943)



- ▶ Maurice Denis (*Wedding*, 1892, above), who participated in several avant-garde movements of his time, was a pious Catholic and a member of the Dominican Third Order

# Kim En Joong



- ▶ Kim En Joong (born 1940), one of Korea's abstract art masters, converted to Catholicism in 1967 and later became a Dominican priest

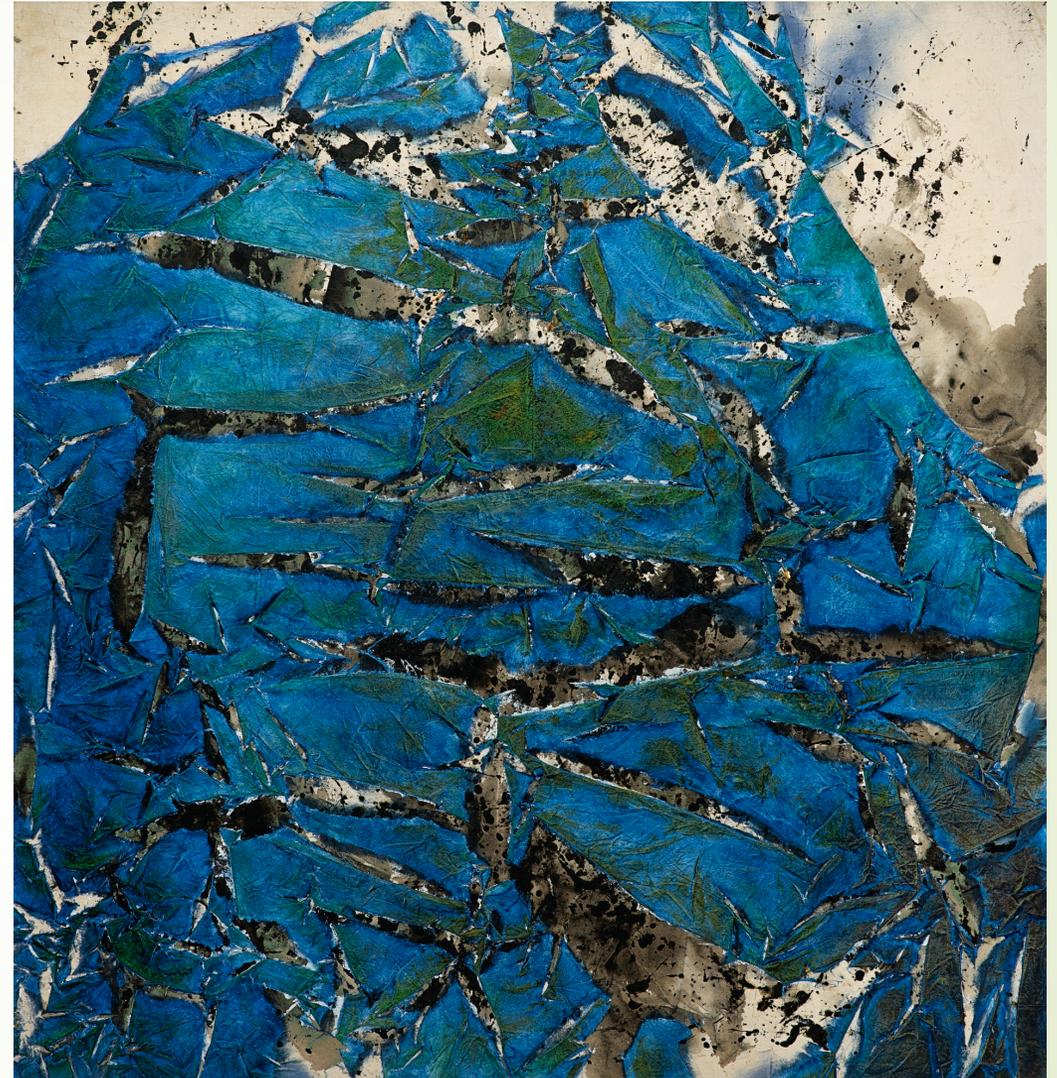
# Georges Mathieu (1921-2012)



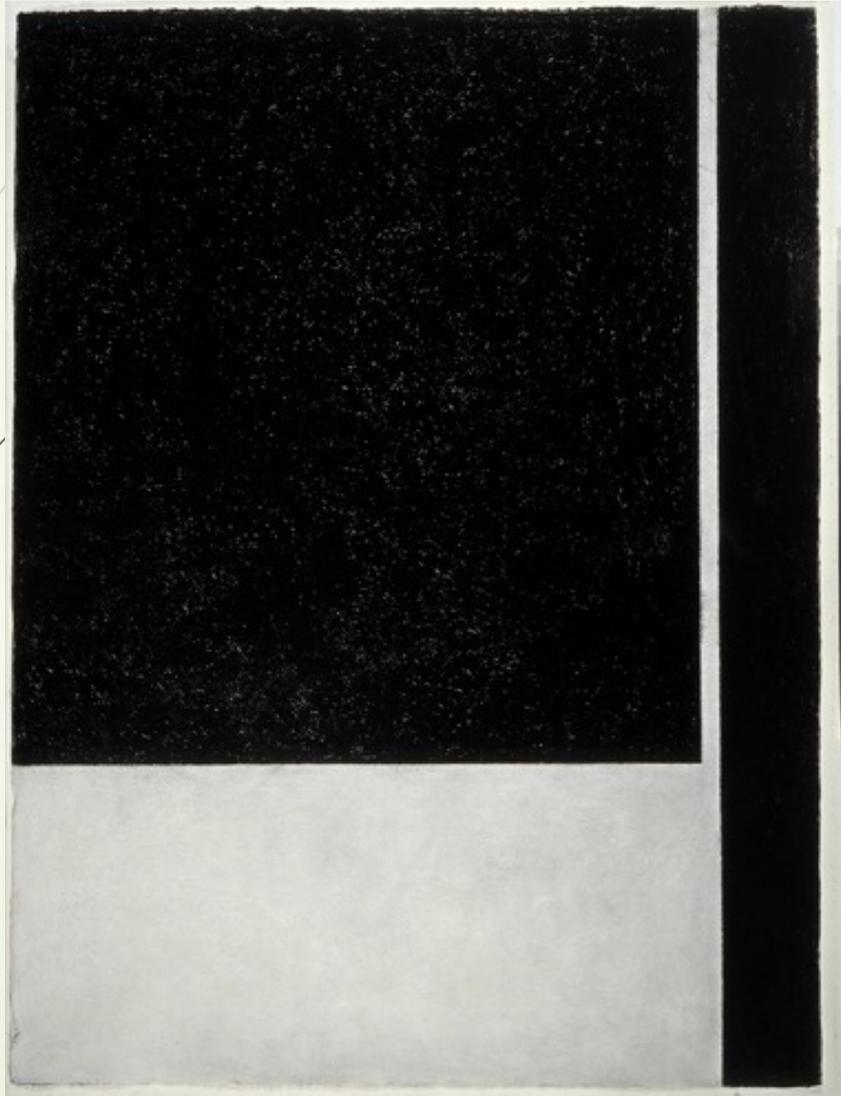
- In France, abstract art was for several years largely a Catholic affair, led by artists such as Georges Mathieu, a conservative and monarchist Catholic (*Capetingians Everywhere*, 1954, above)

# Simon Hantai

- ▶ Mathieu pursued his project of a Catholic abstract art together with Simon Hantai (1922-2008). He was born in Hungary and reverted to Catholicism after the Soviet invasion of his country in 1956. His huge *Mariales* (left, one from 1962 sold in 2015 for more than \$ 2 million) were a tribute to Virgin Mary



# Aurélie Nemours (1910-2005)

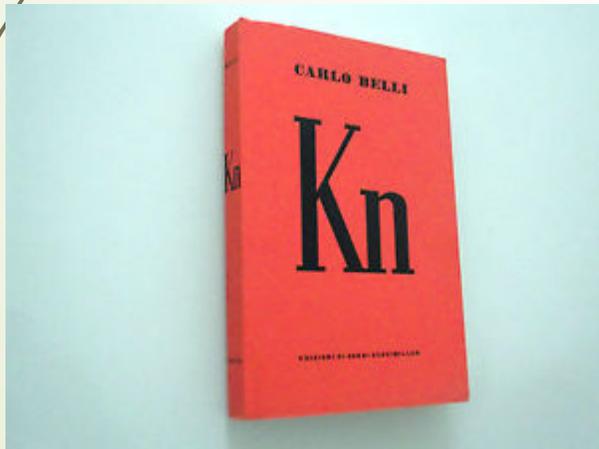


- Close to this group was Aurélie Nemours, whose *Demeures* (1958, ci-contre) were born out of her meditations on Catholic mysticism and the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556)



## Carlo Belli and *KN*

- ▶ Another conservative Catholic, Carlo Belli (1903-1991: *Relationship*, 1929, top), published in 1935 the manifesto of the Italian abstract movement, a book called *KN*. Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) celebrated the book as one of the key statements of abstract art. For Belli, by reducing the world to its essential forms and colors, the abstract artist sees the universe as God himself sees it



# Catholic Responses



- ▶ Traditional religions opposed for decades modernist and (particularly) abstract art. In the Catholic Church, the openings of Benedict XVI and Pope Francis are not completely new, as they find a precedent in Pope Paul VI (1897-1978)

# A Surprising Pius XII...



- ▶ Surprisingly, a conservative Pope such as Pius XII (1876-1958) had already written in his encyclical *Mediator Dei* (1947) that “recent works of art, which lend themselves to the materials of modern composition, should not be universally despised and rejected through prejudice” and “modern art should be given free scope,” although not without limits and reserves



## Marc Chagall (1887-1985)

- Catholicism is not alone in opening to modern art. As far as Judaism is concerned, it would be enough to mention Marc Chagall (*White Crucifixion*, 1938, left, in fact Pope Francis' preferred painting), who was fascinated by the figure of Christ but remained a very Orthodox Jew

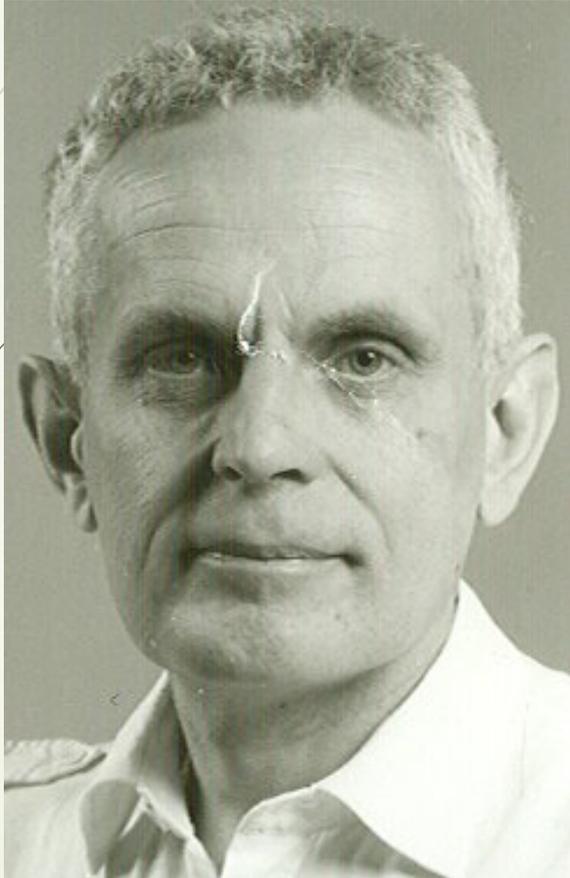
## 2. Modern Art and New Religious and Esoteric Movements

- More than by traditional religions, modern art was influenced by alternative spiritual movements
- The most important (but by no means the only) influence came from the Theosophical Society, established in 1875 in New York by the Russian esoteric leader, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891), and the American lawyer, Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907)



*To the Aryan Theosophical Society, of New York.  
With H. P. B.'s & H. S. O.'s good wishes  
London, October, 1888.*

# Theosophy and the Academia



- ▶ Only a handful of academics studied the Theosophical Society before 1970, when Finnish art historian Sixten Ringbom (left, 1935-1992) published *The Sounding Cosmos*. The book claimed that Theosophy had a crucial influence on Kandinsky and the genesis of modern abstract art

# The Fourth Dimension



- In 1983, leading American art historian Linda Dalrymple Henderson (left) published *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art*. The book showed how the Theosophical Society was instrumental in spreading ideas about a fourth dimension located in space (rather in time) that were enormously influential on modern art

# Exhibitions and Conferences

- Two important exhibitions, *The Spiritual in Art* (Los Angeles 1986) and *Okkultismus und Avantgarde* (Frankfurt 1995), followed by a conference in 2013 at the University of Amsterdam (right), and several others, made the Theosophical connections of modernist art known even outside the academia





## Reginald Machell

- The first Theosophical artists, including Reginald Willoughby Machell (1854-1927), who moved from England to California, proposed a didactic art illustrating Theosophical doctrines
- *The Path* (1895, left), Machell's most famous work, depicts the ascent of the initiate according to Blavatsky

# Jean Delville (1867-1953)



- ▶ In several countries, the local branches of the Theosophical Society were established or led by artists. In Belgium, between 1899 and 1913, the Society was led by symbolist painter Jean Delville (*L'Ange des splendeurs*, 1894, left), whose art was constantly influenced by Blavatsky and by Alsatian Theosophist Édouard Schuré (1841-1929)

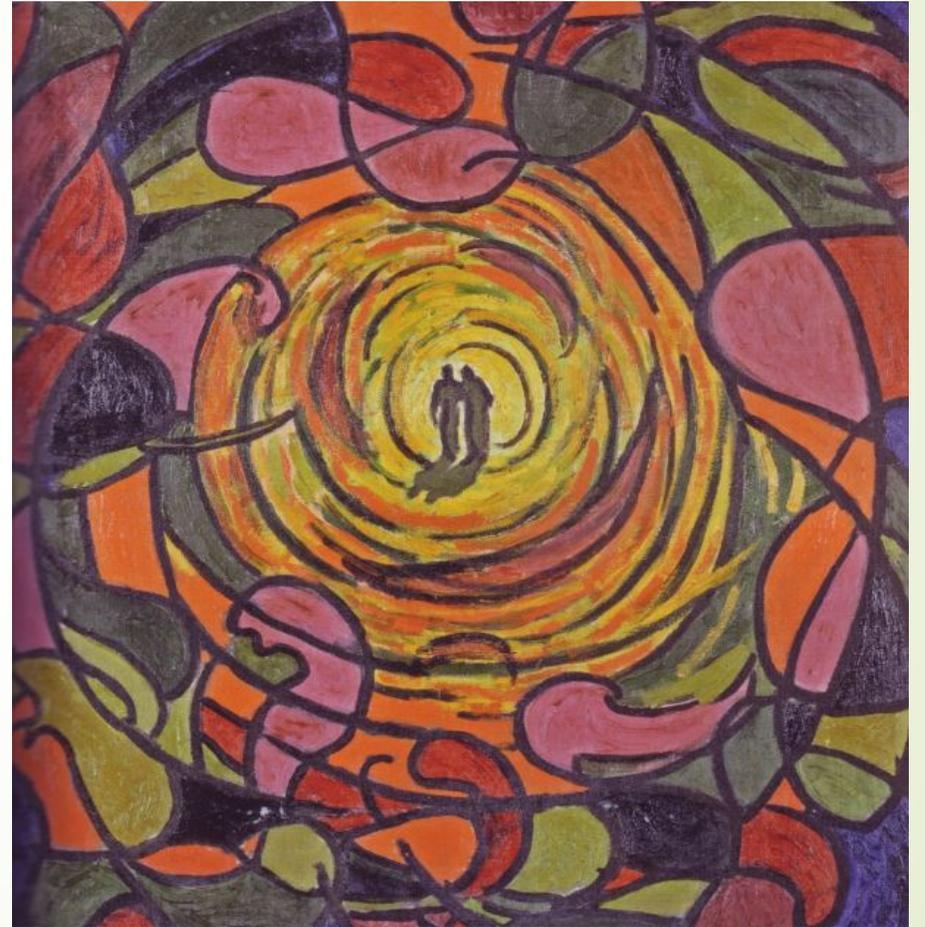
# The Nabis



- The French movement of the Nabis ("Prophets") may be regarded as an artistic secret society, with its own rituals inspired by Schuré. Its leaders were Paul Ranson (1864-1909) and Paul Sérusier (1864-1927: *La Méditation du Mouni Vasichta*, 1915, above)

# Maurice Chabas (1862-1947)

- ▶ In his Paris living room, Schuré exhibited four paintings by Maurice Chabas. An eclectic symbolist who moved from Christian Science to Theosophy and to Catholicism, Chabas (*Vers l'au-delà - Marche à deux*, unknown date, right), was at the center of a salon in his Neuilly studio where one would meet Schuré as well as the esoteric author René Guénon (1886-1951), a staunch critic of Theosophy, and the Catholic theologian Father Antonin Sertillanges (1863-1948)



# Fidus (1868-1948)

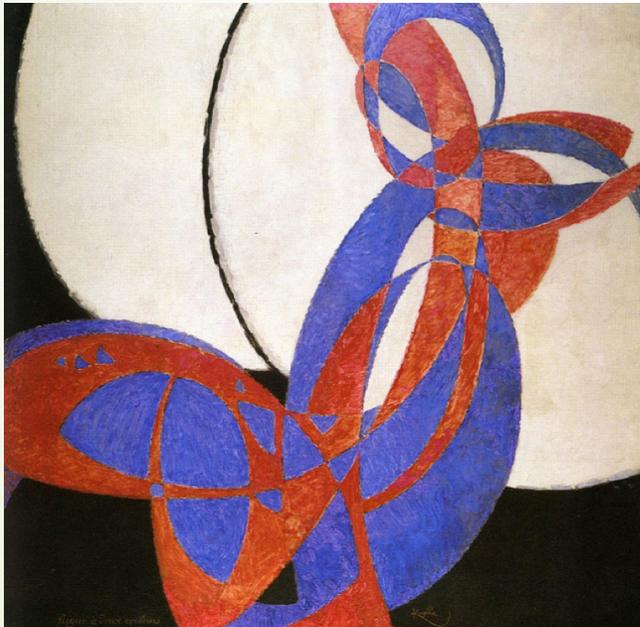
- Symbolism was somewhat continued as Art Nouveau. One of its European most popular interpreters, the German Hugo Höppener (Fidus: *Atlantis*, 1907, right), was an active member of the Theosophical Society for several decades, although he later joined the Nazi Party





## From Symbolism to Abstract Art

- Theosophy, with its doctrine of pure forms, influenced the passage of several artists from “symbolism” (a contested concept) to abstract art. They included Czech painter František Kupka (1871-1957), who went from the Schuré-inspired *The Way of Silence* (1900-1903, above) to the abstract *Amorpha* (1912, below)



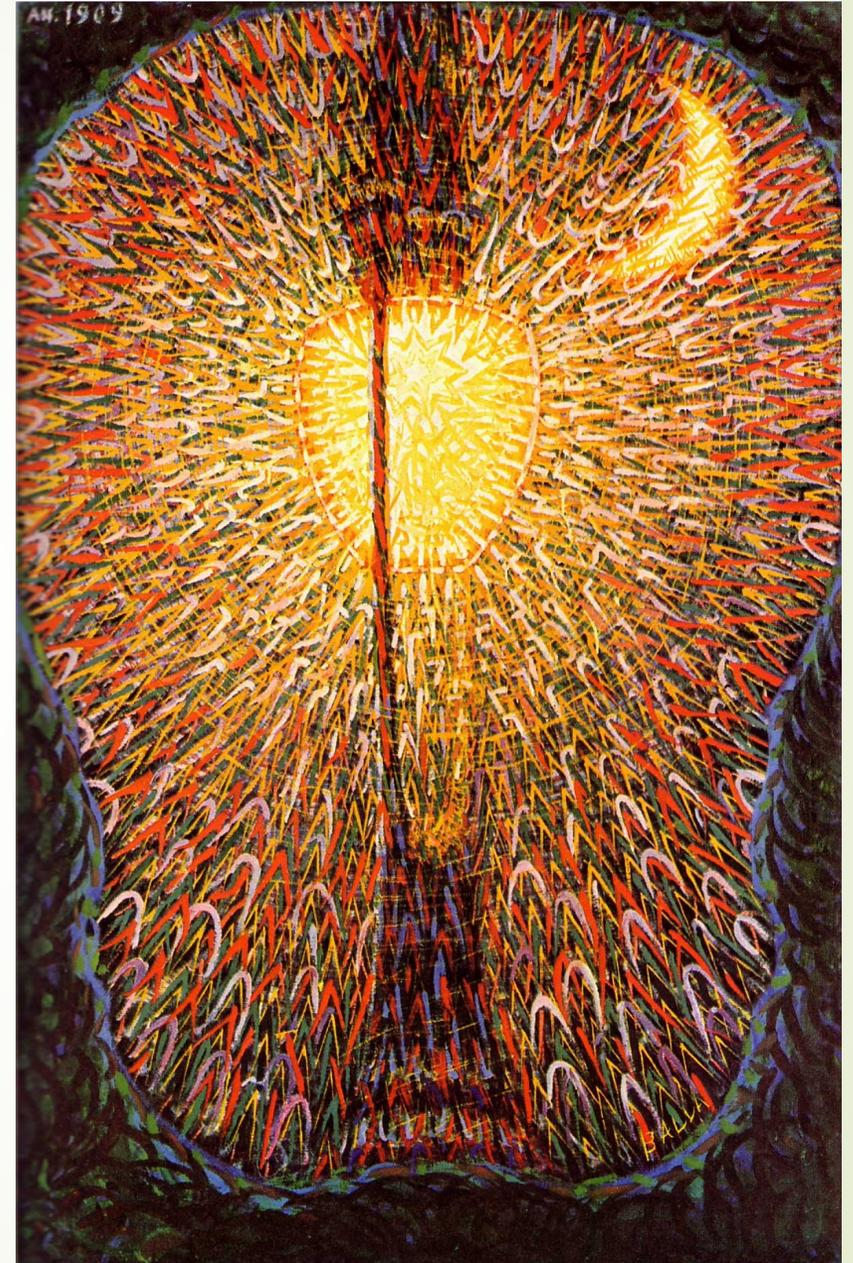
# A Link: Čiurlionis



- Increasingly, art historians acknowledge the crucial role in the passage from symbolism to abstract art of Lithuanian painter and composer Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis (1875-1911: *Prelude-Angel*, 1909, left). He was part of a Theosophical group in Warsaw and remained almost unknown in the West before the fall of the Soviet Union

# Theosophy and Futurism

- Several scholars study today the influence of Theosophy on Italian futurists, including Giacomo Balla (1871-1958; *Street Light*, 1909-1910, right), Arnaldo Ginna – a card-carrying member of the Theosophical Society –, and Umberto Boccioni (1882-1916)



# Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944)



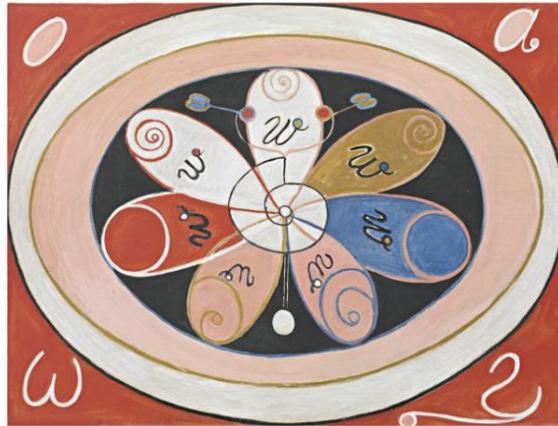
- The first studies of Theosophical influences were about Kandinsky (see his so called “first abstract watercolor,” 1910, left)
- Kandinsky mentioned explicitly the importance for his art of Theosophy in his key theoretical work, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1910)

# “The Great Spiritual”

- Kandinsky claimed that figurative art had become materialistic and that only abstract art might be truly spiritual, by perceiving the “inner forms” through a mystical “inner sense.” Abstract art, Kandinsky believed, would lead the world out of the epoch of materialism into the new era of “the Great Spiritual”



# Hilma af Klint (1862-1944)



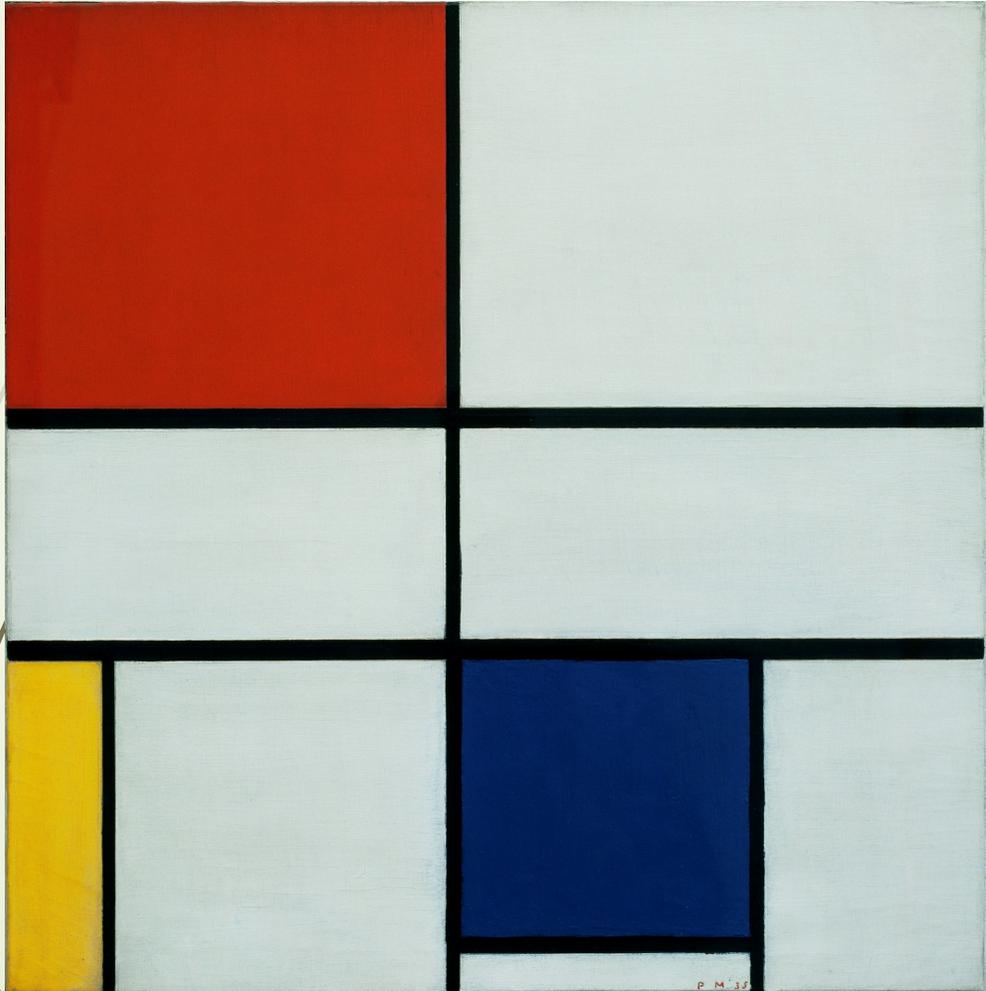
- Art abstract was born from multiple sources. The role of Swedish painter Hilma af Klint (1862-1944) is now increasingly recognized
- Hilma af Klint was a Spiritualist and claimed her hands were guided by spirits. She was also a member of the Theosophical Society

# Mondrian and Theosophy



- ▶ Another founder of modern abstract art, the Dutch painter Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), was also an active member of the Theosophical Society. Some of his early works, including *Evolution* (1910-1911, above), illustrated the path of the initiate according to Blavatsky

# Neo-Plasticism as “Theosophical Art”



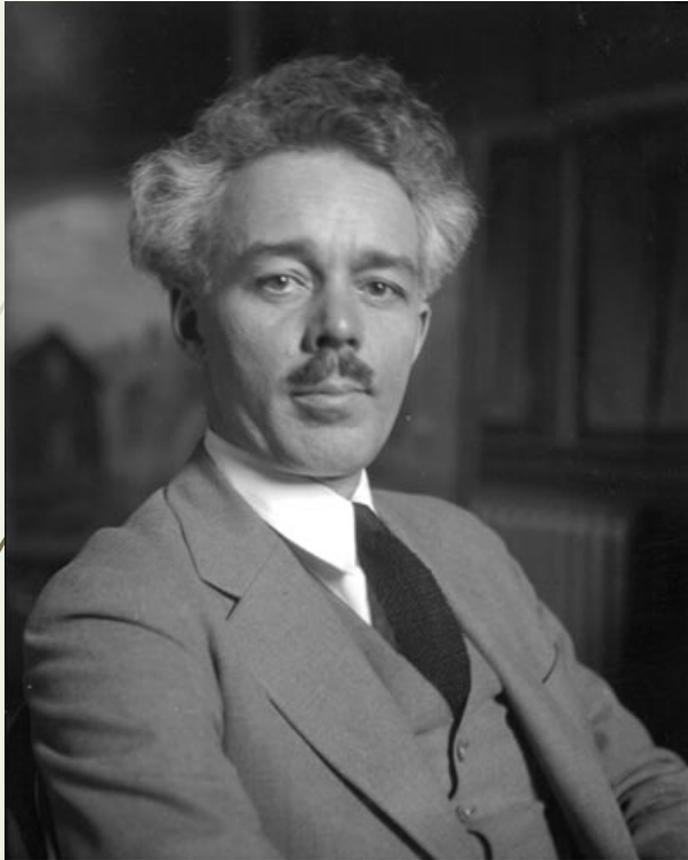
- Mondrian believed that Neo-Plasticism, the artistic movement he co-founded, produced “Theosophical art par excellence” (*Composition with Red, Blue, and Yellow*, 1935, left). This idea was not accepted by the Theosophical Society and, as we shall see, Mondrian in his later years also explored a different spiritual path

# Jackson Pollock (1912-1956)

- Some claim that, unlike Mondrian, Pollock (*Convergence*, 1952, right), was not interested in spirituality. Recent biographers, however, noticed that Pollock attended Theosophical camps as an art student. Later, he lost interest in Theosophy but returned to it in his last years



# Lawren Stewart Harris (1885-1970)



- ▶ Canada produced the single most interested artist in defining what a Theosophical art could be, Lawren Harris (left). He is also regarded as the most important Canadian artist of the 20th century

# The Group of Seven



- In 1920, Harris established the Group of Seven, whose influence on Canadian modern art was decisive. Three of the Seven – Harris, James Edward Hervey MacDonald (1873-1932) and Arthur Lismer (1885-1969) – were members of the Theosophical Society, but all were familiar with both Theosophy and Christian Science

# Christian Science

- ▶ While Theosophy's influence on Harris has been acknowledged, less studied is the influence of the American metaphysical religion of Christian Science. Both Harris' mother and his beloved second wife, Bess Housser (1891-1969, here portrayed as *The Christian Scientist*, 1920), were members of Christian Science

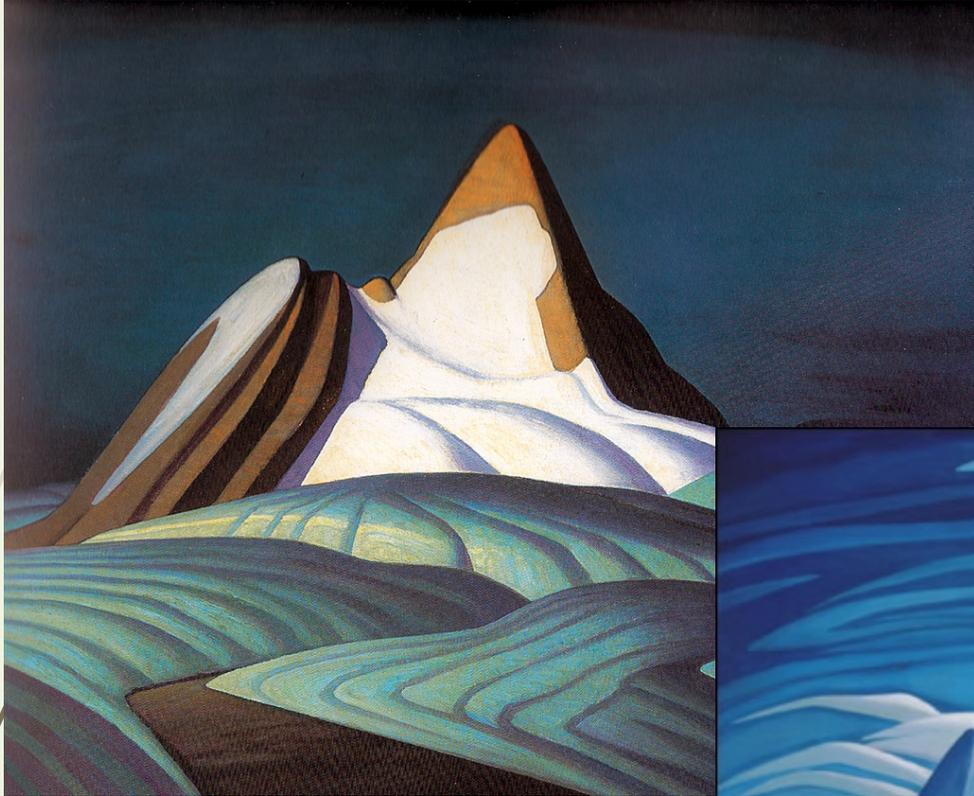


# Harris' Golden Years



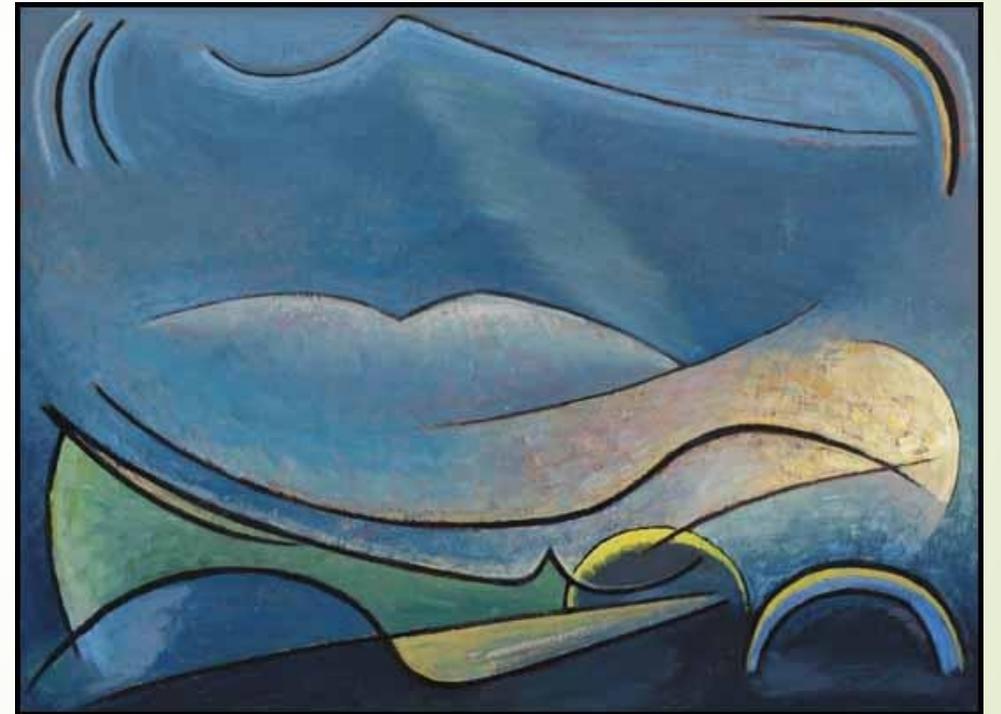
- It is in the years of the Group of Seven that Harris produced his masterpieces, including *On the North Shore, Lake Superior* (1926)

... and his great Canadian landscapes



# A Non-Symbolic Art

- Unlike other Theosophists such as Delville or the Nabis, Harris rejected symbolism altogether. Symbols take the audience outside of the paintings, while for Harris, in a true Theosophical art, the audience should remain *inside* of the painting and merge with it

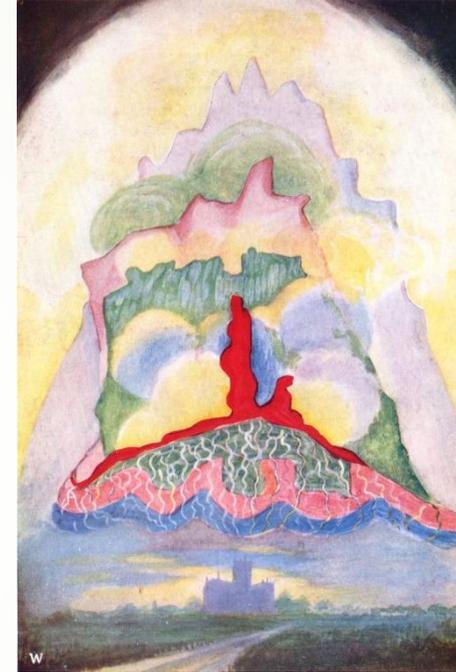
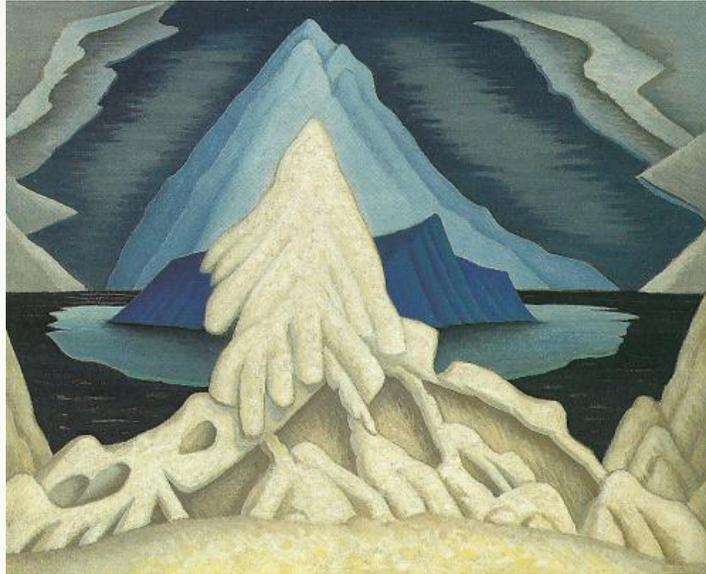


# *Atma Buddhi Manas*



- ▶ This, Harris claimed, includes Theosophical symbols. A Theosophical art should not “preach” Theosophy but create an experience of total beauty. Harris, however, made some exceptions himself, as demonstrated by his late *Atma Buddhi Manas* (1960, left), in fact a beautiful Theosophical diagram

# Harris and *Thought-Forms*



- ▶ Like other artists, Harris did read *Thought-Forms* (1905) by Theosophical leaders Annie Besant (1847-1933) and Charles Webster Leadbeater (1854-1934), where emotions and even music (right) are seen as forms and colors by clairvoyance.
- ▶ The influence of the book on Harris and other artists should not be exaggerated, although there is a certain echo of it in some of Harris' works (left)

# Emily Carr (1871-1945)



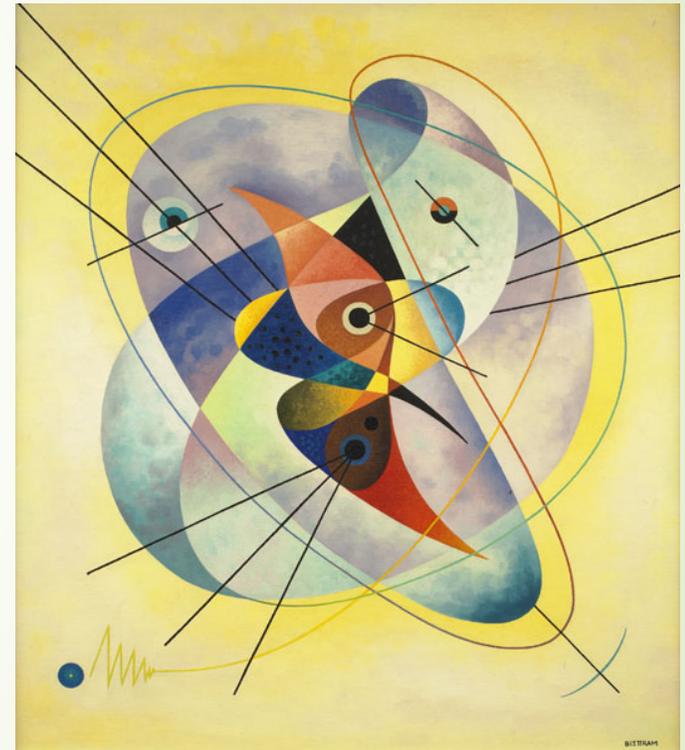
- ▶ Harris “discovered” and promoted Emily Carr (left), a regional artist from British Columbia.
- ▶ He tried to convert her to Theosophy and succeeded for a while (see her *Grey*, 1930, right), although she finally rejected Theosophy for Christianity, while remaining a good friend of Harris



# The Transcendental Painting Group



- ▶ Having turned to the abstract (*Abstract no. 7*, left), Harris spent the years 1938-1940 in New Mexico. There, he founded the Transcendental Painting Group (TPG) with other artists interested in Theosophy, including the Hungarian-born New York painter Emil Bisttram (1895-1976: *Time Cycle - Yellow*, right), Raymond Jonson (1891-1982), and French astrologer, composer, and painter Dane Rudhyar (pseud. of Daniel Chennevière, 1895-1985)

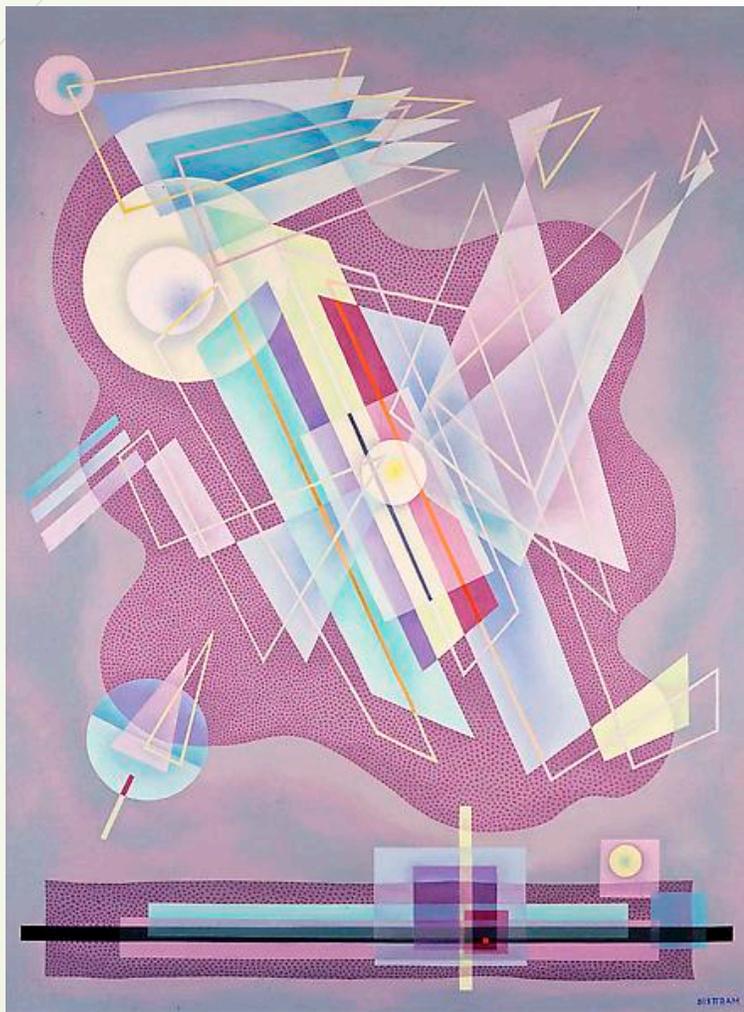


## Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947)

- ▶ Most TPG members had connections with Russian painter Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947: *The Fall of Atlantis*, 1928, right). Roerich and his wife Helena (1879-1955) claimed to receive on a regular basis messages from the same Masters of Wisdom who had spoken to Blavatsky, which eventually generated a Theosophical schism known as Agni Yoga



# New Age

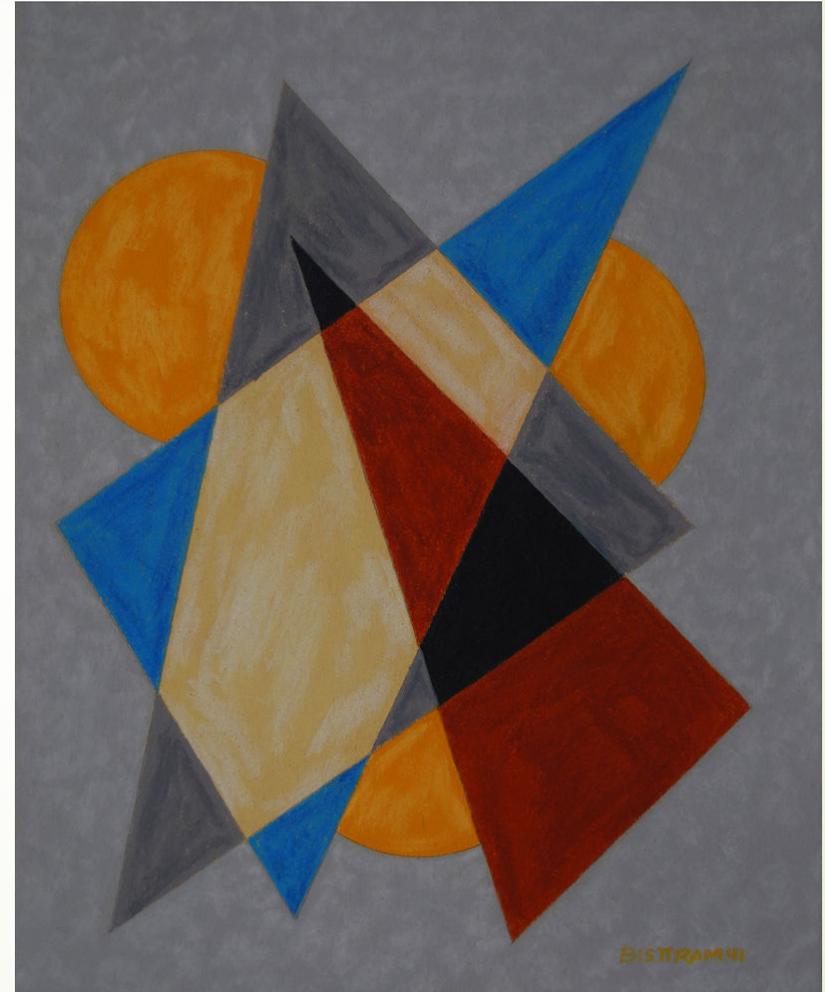


- ▶ Bisttram and the other TPG artists were among the first persons in the world to elaborate a theory of a “New Age” in the current sense of the word
- ▶ They claimed it would come in 1936 following the calculations of Roerich, although the latter in fact awaited for that date the inauguration of a messianic kingdom in Central Asia

Bisttram, *Oversoul*, ca.1940

# Bisttram's Encaustics: *Mystical Portals*

- ▶ Between 1936 and 1947, Bisttram produced several encaustics. i.e. paintings made with the technique of hot wax. They were not sold and he only showed them to selected friends
- ▶ For him, these paintings were mystical portals, capable of realigning the cosmic energies and opening the world to the New Age



# Anthroposophy

- ▶ There is a reason why I insisted on Theosophy, as its influence on modern art was in fact outstanding
- ▶ But many other spiritual and esoteric movements influenced modern artists. In 2015, in Olomouc (Czech Republic) the impressive exhibition *Ænigma* collected the works of the artists who had been members of the Anthroposophical Society, Theosophy's Christian schism. The most famous was probably the German Joseph Beuys (1921-1986: *Crucifixion*, left)



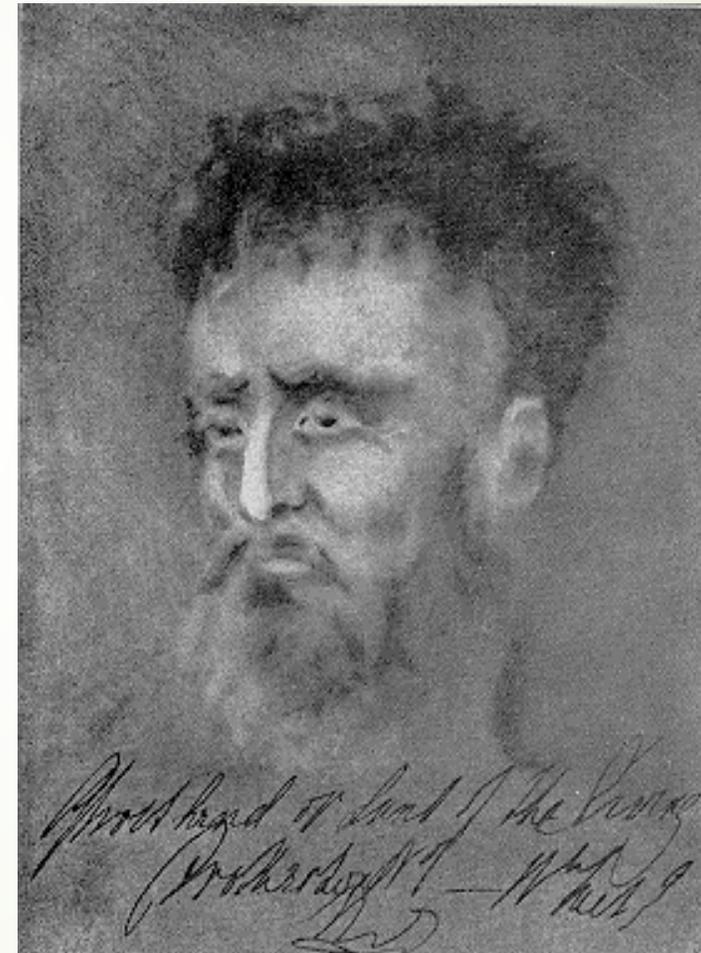
# Spiritualism

- ▶ Spiritualism always included spirit art. Hilma af Klint was not the only artist who claimed that she was not the real author of her paintings, as her hands were guided by the spirits. Other artists who made the same claim included the British Ethel Le Rossignol (1873-1970, right)



# Miraculous Paintings

- ▶ In fact, there were (and are) two kinds of spirit art. In the first, the artist's hands were guided by the spirits. The second involved the "precipitation" of works of art that appeared on canvas or paper, ostensibly without the use of human hands, during a Spiritualist séance. Blavatsky herself produced precipitated spirit paintings in her early career (*Tiruvalla Yogi, 1877, right*)



# Spirit Paintings in the United States



- Precipitated spirit artworks in the U.S. became typical of the séances of the Bangs sisters (left), Elizabeth (1860-1922) and May (Mary) Eunice (1863-1917), and the so-called Campbell Brothers, Allen Campbell (1833-1919) and Charles Shourds (1863-1926), and were associated with the Spiritualist community of Lily Dale, New York

# Accusations of Fraud

- Mediums involved in precipitated paintings were often accused of fraud, none more frequently than “Swami Laura Horos,” a.k.a. Ann Odelia Diss Debar (1849-1911, right). Horos ended up in jail in 1901, sentenced to seven-year imprisonment both for fraud and for immoral sexual practices in her temple in London, and was labeled by the media “the world’s worst woman”



# Georgiana Houghton (1814-1884)



- While precipitated paintings were often of an unexceptional quality, artists whose hands were allegedly guided by spirits were, in some cases, real masters. Leading British art critics commenting on the 2016 London exhibition of spirit artist Georgiana Houghton (left) stated that, spirits or no spirits, history of the 19<sup>th</sup> century art should be rewritten, making room for Houghton as a major precursor of abstract art

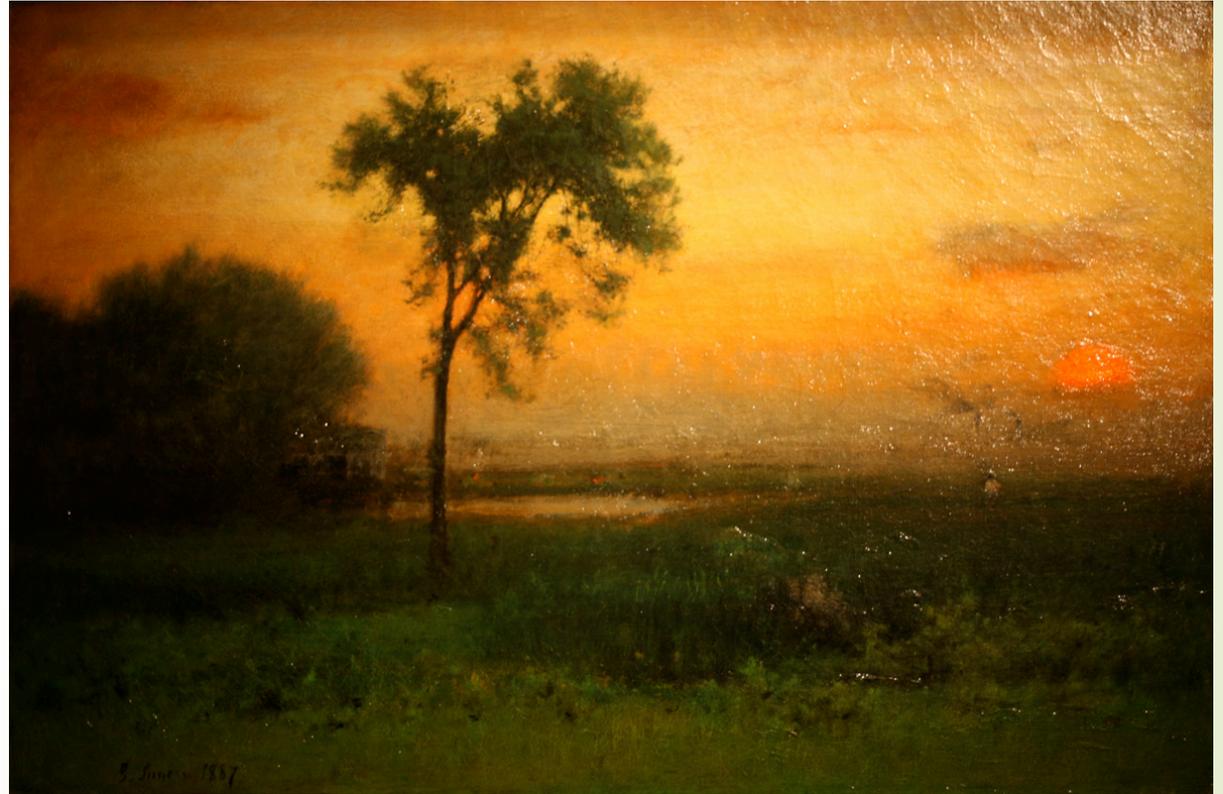
# Madge Gill (1882-1961)

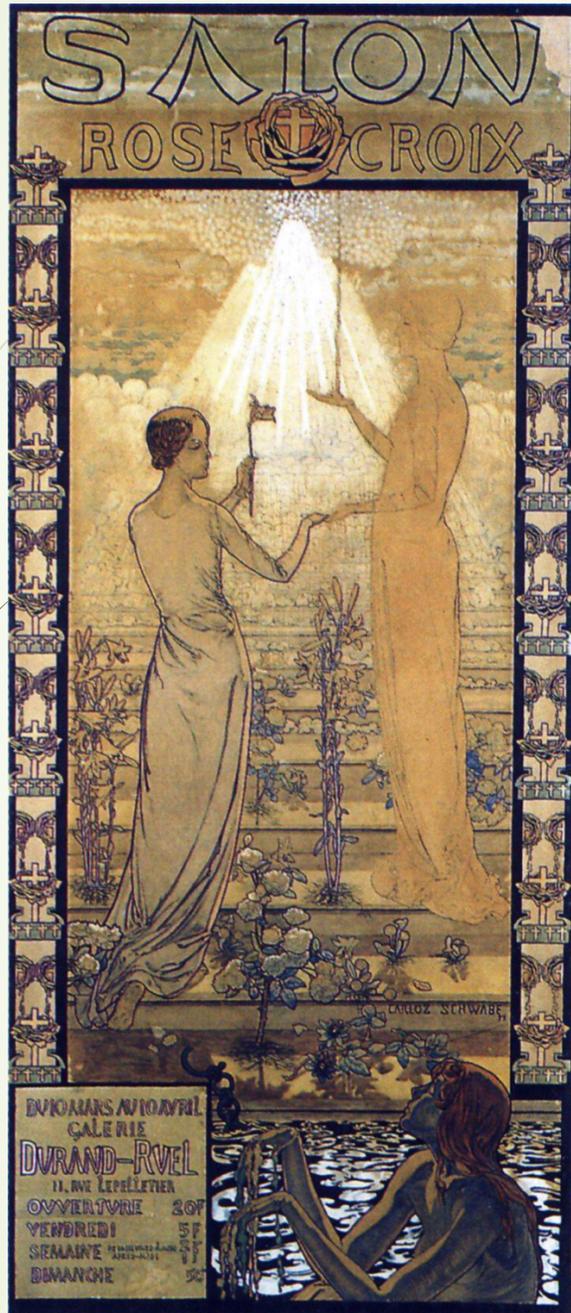


- ▶ In other cases, the jury is still out. Artists such as Madge Gill are regarded by some as part of “art brut,” a label covering art produced by children, lunatics, and other “marginal” figures, while others would regard them as a legitimate part of mainline art

# Swedenborgianism

- ▶ A surprising number of artists were interested in the teachings of Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) and some, including George Inness (1825-1894: *Sunrise*, 1887, Brooklyn Museum), formally converted to one of the Swedenborgian churches. In June 2017, a conference on Swedenborg and the arts will be held in Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania, gathering distinguished scholars from several countries





# Rosicrucianism

- ▶ Perhaps even more important for modern art were the movements inspired by the legend of the Rosy Cross. Joséphin Péladan (1858-1918), founder of one of several 19th century Rosicrucian movements, is often regarded as a mere eccentric. However, his *Salons de la Rose-Croix* were crucially important for the European Symbolism and will be the subject matter of a much-awaited exhibition opening at the Guggenheim Museum on June 30, 2017



## Max Heindel

- ▶ A different Rosicrucian branch was established in California by Danish Theosophist Max Heindel (1865-1919). His theories of colors interested several artists. One was French Yves Klein (1928-1962), whose copyrighted “Klein Blue” (left) was explicitly created following Heindel’s ideas. In fact, Klein was a member of Heindel’s Rosicrucian Fellowship before rejecting it in favor of Catholicism

# Diego Rivera, Rosicrucian

- ▶ In 1926, celebrated Mexican muralist Diego Rivera (1886-1957) co-founded the Mexico City lodge of the American-based Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis (AMORC) and painted the icon of Quetzalcoatl (right) for its temple
- ▶ Rivera was also a Marxist , who later tried to explain his AMORC activities to the Communist Party by claiming that Rosicrucianism “is based on Egyptian occult knowledge,” which is “essentially materialist, insofar as it only admits different states of energy and matter”

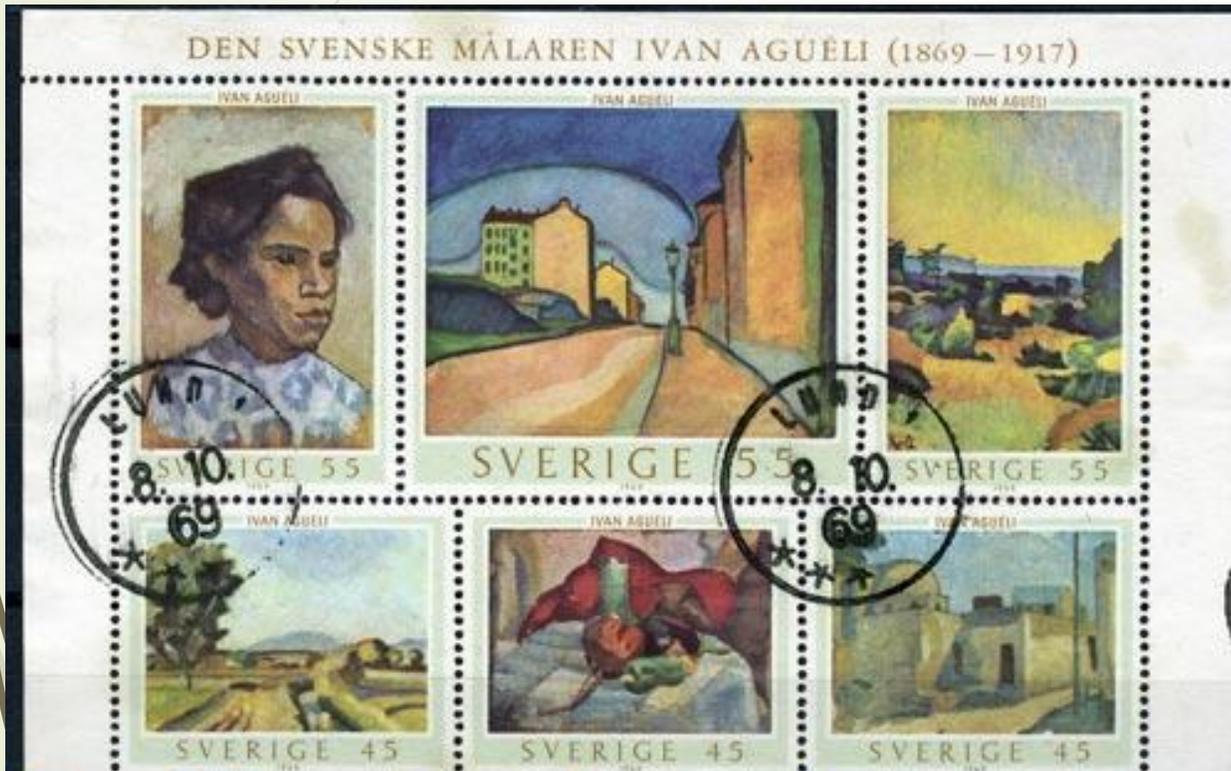


# Ouspensky and Gurdjieff

- In Russia and elsewhere, several artists were in touch with Pyotr D. Ouspensky (1878-1947), a Theosophist and an associate of Armenian occult master Georges Gurdjieff (1866?-1949)
- One of these artists was Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935), the Russian pioneer of geometrical abstract art (*Suprematist Composition*, 1916, left). We will revert to Malevich later



# René Guénon



- Guénon's esotericism was anti-modern and anti-Theosophical. But he was also close to modernist painters, including Chabas. And he was initiated into the Sufi Shadiliyya brotherhood by an artist friend, Ivan Aguéli (1869-1917: left, Swedish stamps celebrating his works), a member of a larger circle of Scandinavian esoteric and Theosophical painters

# Julius Evola (1898-1974)

- ▶ Evola, another esoteric master of anti-modern and right-wing persuasions, was himself an interesting painter. A Futurist and a pupil of Balla (*Forge – Study of Rumors*, 1918, right), he later joined the Dada movement before abandoning art altogether

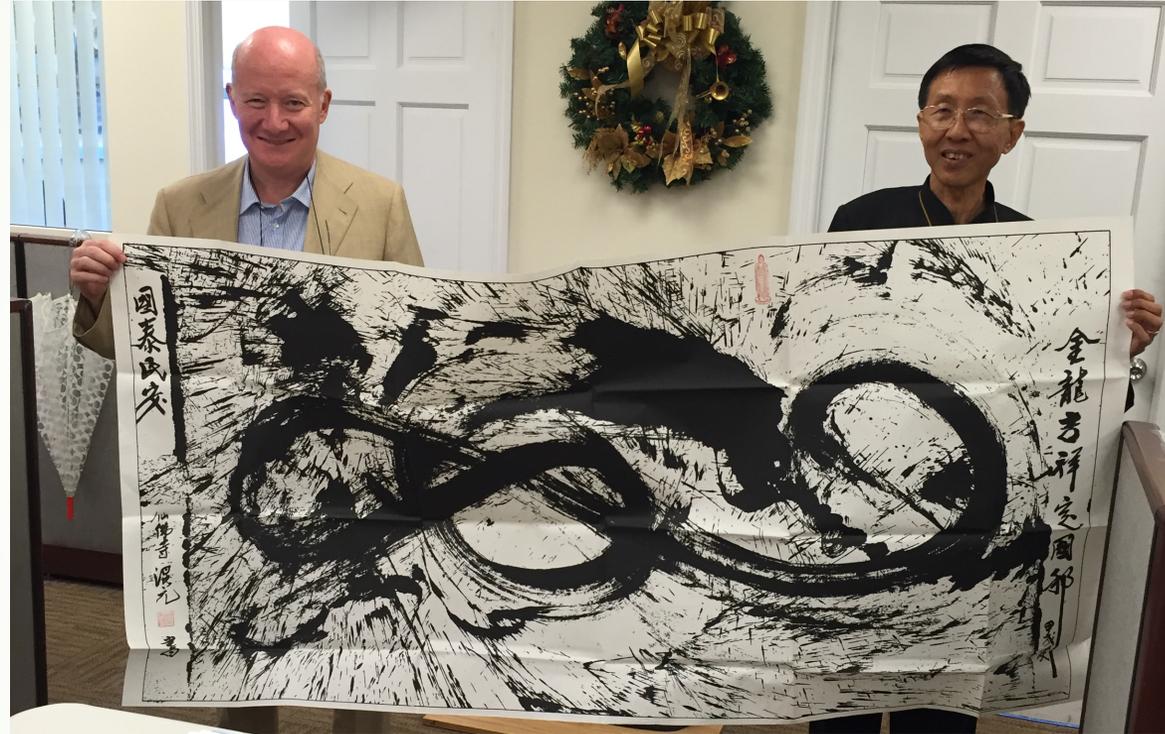


# Aleister Crowley (1875-1947)

- Crowley, a much rumored but notable esoteric master, was himself an amateur painter. He also inspired professional painters such as the Argentinian Xul Solar (pseud. of Oscar Augustín Alejandro Schulz Solari, 1887-1963: *Funerals*, 1915, left). Crowley regarded Solar as “the best seer I ever tested” and asked him to illustrate the Chinese classic *I Ching* (right)



# Weixin Shengjiao



- ▶ The mention of *I Ching* is the opportunity for noting that not only esoteric but also new religious movements have inspired modern art. The increasingly globalized Taiwanese new religious movement Weixin Shengjiao, based on *I Ching*, produces beautiful works of art, most of them authored by its founder, Grand Master Hun Yuan

# Christian Science



- ▶ This was, in a way, always true. We mentioned the influence of Christian Science on Lawren Harris and the Group of Seven. But this American metaphysical religion influenced several other artists, including the British colorist Winifred Nicholson (1893-1981: *Window-Sill, Lugano, 1923*, left) and New York artist Joseph Cornell (1903-1972)

# Joseph Cornell

- ▶ Cornell (*Hotel Eden*, 1945, right) is regarded, together with his non-religious friend Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), as the founder of contemporary art as something different from modern art and no longer connected with traditional notions of painting and sculpting. Neither a painter nor a sculptor, Cornell assembled together in his boxes and collages disparate objects found by exploring New York





# Cornell's Religion

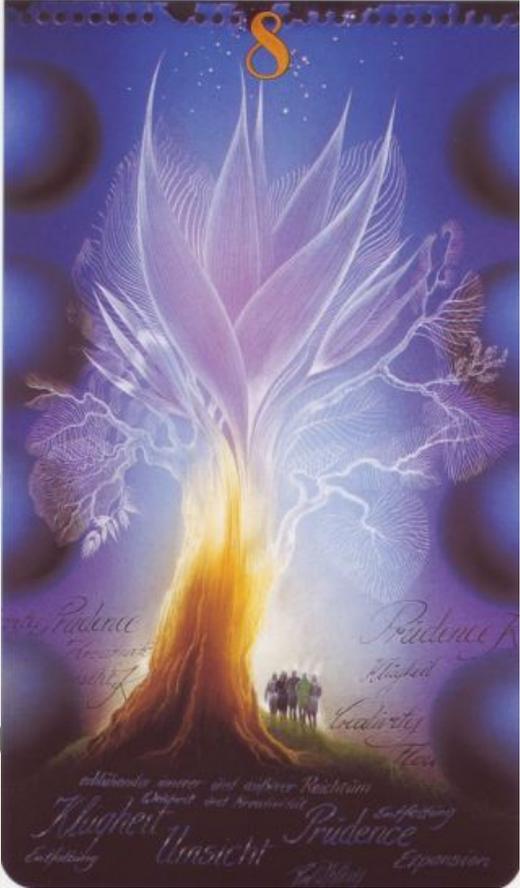
- Cornell (*Penny Arcade*, 1962, left) always insisted that his art was strictly connected with Christian Science. He recreated in the microcosm of his boxes the ideal universe existing above the delusions of this material world that is at the very center of Christian Science

# Scientology

- Obviously not to be confused with Christian Science, the Church of Scientology offers specific courses to artists in its Celebrity Centres. They were attended by well-known artists, including the Austrian Gottfried Helmwein, whose controversial *Epiphany II* invited German-speaking Europe to face and renounce its Nazi past once and for all



# Celebrity Centres Artists



- ▶ Scientology courses were attended by very different artists, from German “fantastic realist” Carl-W. Röhrig, well-known for his Tarot cards (left), to Canadian-born Brooklyn abstract painter Beatrice Findlay (above) and Swiss artist Claude Sandoz (right), who spends a significant part of his time in Saint Lucia, Caribbean





## ISKCON

- ▶ In September 2016, commemorating its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the Hare Krishna movement (ISKCON) organized in New York the exhibition *Matchless Gifts*, collecting works by artists who were either members or inspired by the movement, including Mark Kostabi (below). To these, it should be added the Italian Luigi Ontani (*Krishna*, 1977, above)

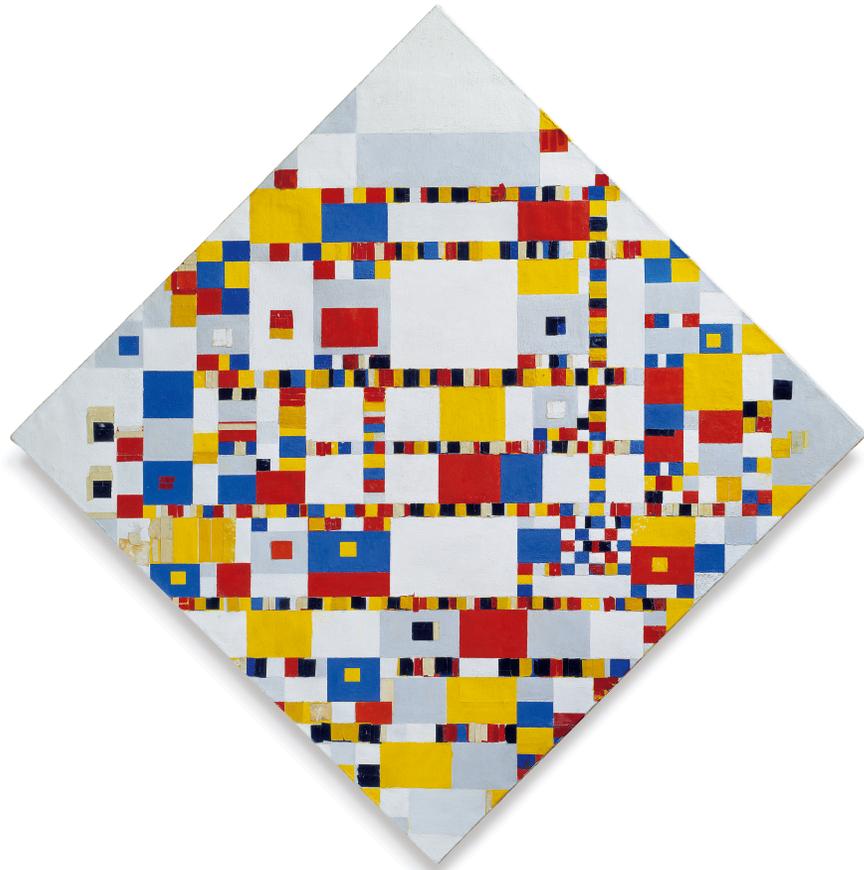


# MISA (Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute )



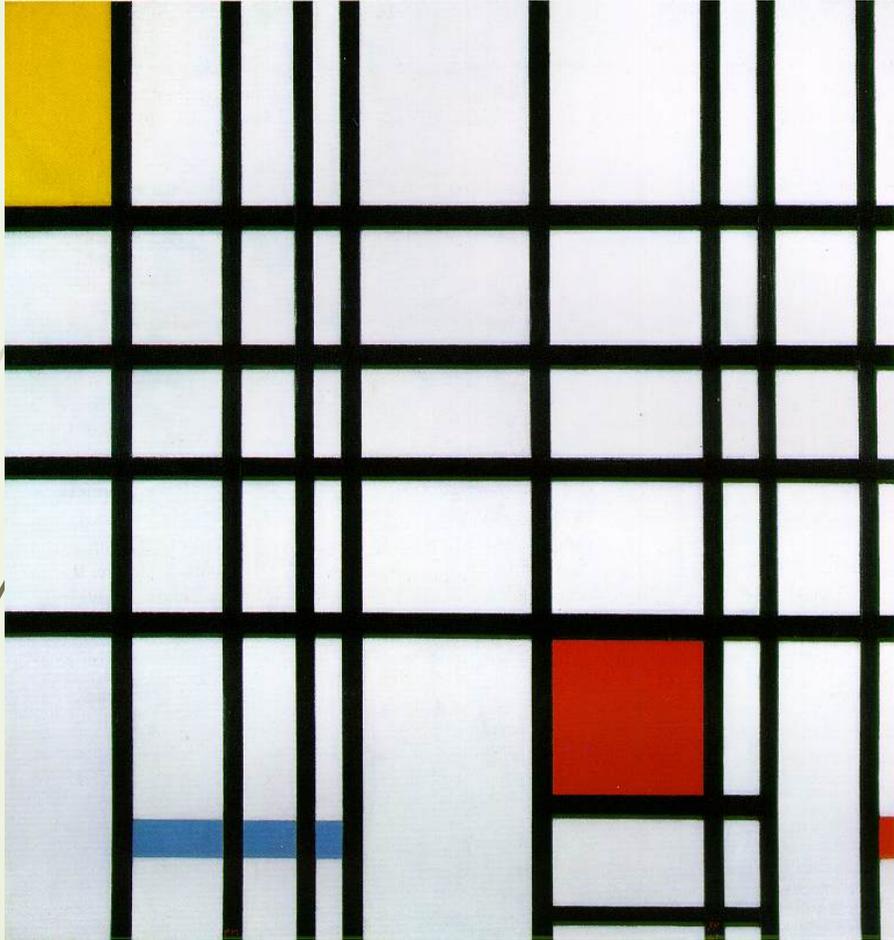
- New religious and spiritual movements continuously emerge all over the world, and many produce their own art. These meditation yantras are by Ines Honfi, a member of the Romanian esoteric movement MISA. Other members of MISA produced erotic movies (some of them distributed through adult portals), claiming that they too may be part of an “objective art”

### 3. Modern Art as Religion



- Some artists argued that both traditional and alternative spiritualities had exhausted their energy, and only art itself could offer to the world the new religion it needed
- Mondrian (*Victory Boogie-Woogie*, 1944, left), disappointed by the Theosophical Society's lack of enthusiasm for his art, concluded that his artistic movement, Neo-Plasticism, could become itself the new religion the world was awaiting

# Beyond Religion, Art?



- In his later years, Mondrian (*Composition with Yellow, Blue and Red*, 1942, left) came to believe that modern art was capable of offering to humans all they had sought in religion. But, in his new religion, traces of Theosophy remained evident

# Arte Povera and Omnitheism

- Similar ideas are occasionally expressed within the Italian Arte Povera movement. Michelangelo Pistoletto (*Venus of the Rags*, 1967, right) launched a manifesto proposing “Omnitheism” as a “secular religion” and a synthesis of monotheism, polytheism, and pantheism



# Marina Abramović



- Serbian performance artist Marina Abramović proposes healing sessions that are both artistic performances and New Age rituals to her audiences and private clients (including Lady Gaga), perhaps marking a new stage of the relationship between the artist as initiate and her followers

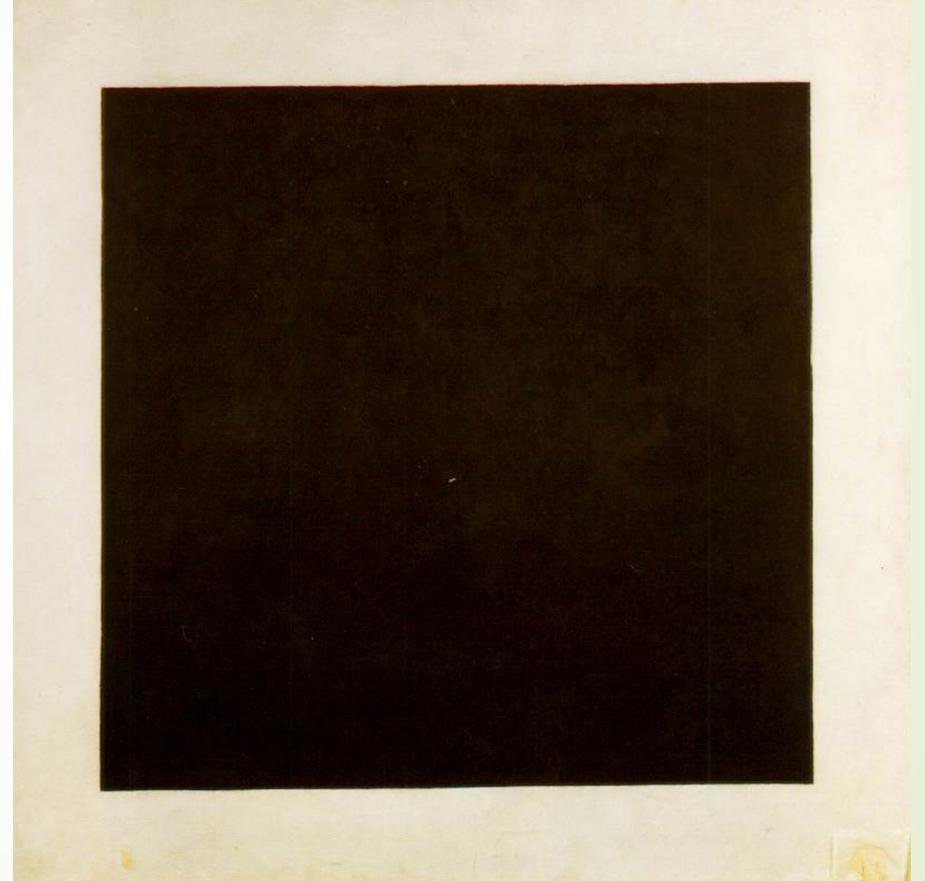
# Malevich

- ▶ Most of these “new religions” created by artists have a very limited number of followers. And they do not create specific rituals for baptisms or funerals. One exception, however, was Malevich. Already in 1907 (right), he represented himself as God in a fresco intended for an Orthodox church, less a manifestation of megalomania than a statement about the divine nature of art

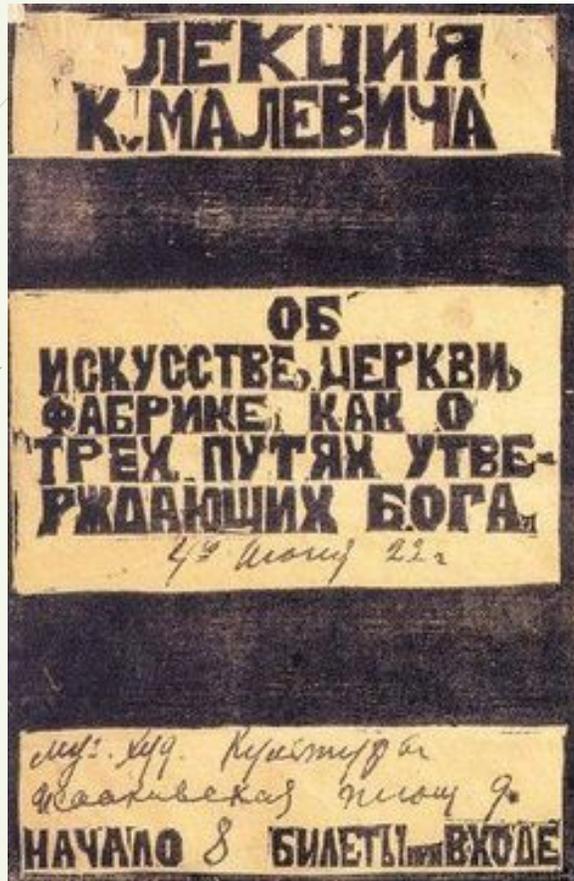


# The Black Square

- ▶ Although controversies exist on its real date, Malevich always dated 1915 both his *Black Square* and the birth of his movement, Suprematism
- ▶ “Were humanity to draw an image of the Divinity after its own image – Malevich wrote –, perhaps the black square is the image of God as the essence of His perfection”



# God Is Not Cast Down



- ▶ In 1920, Malevich published in Soviet Russia *God Is Not Cast Down*, where he proclaimed that, in Hegelian and Marxist terms, Christianity was the thesis, Communism was the antithesis, and Suprematism was the synthesis, the new religion replacing the old one and without which Communism would not survive. The regime disagreed, and Malevich was eventually arrested

Above: Poster for a lecture by Malevich (1922) introducing *God Is Not Cast Down*

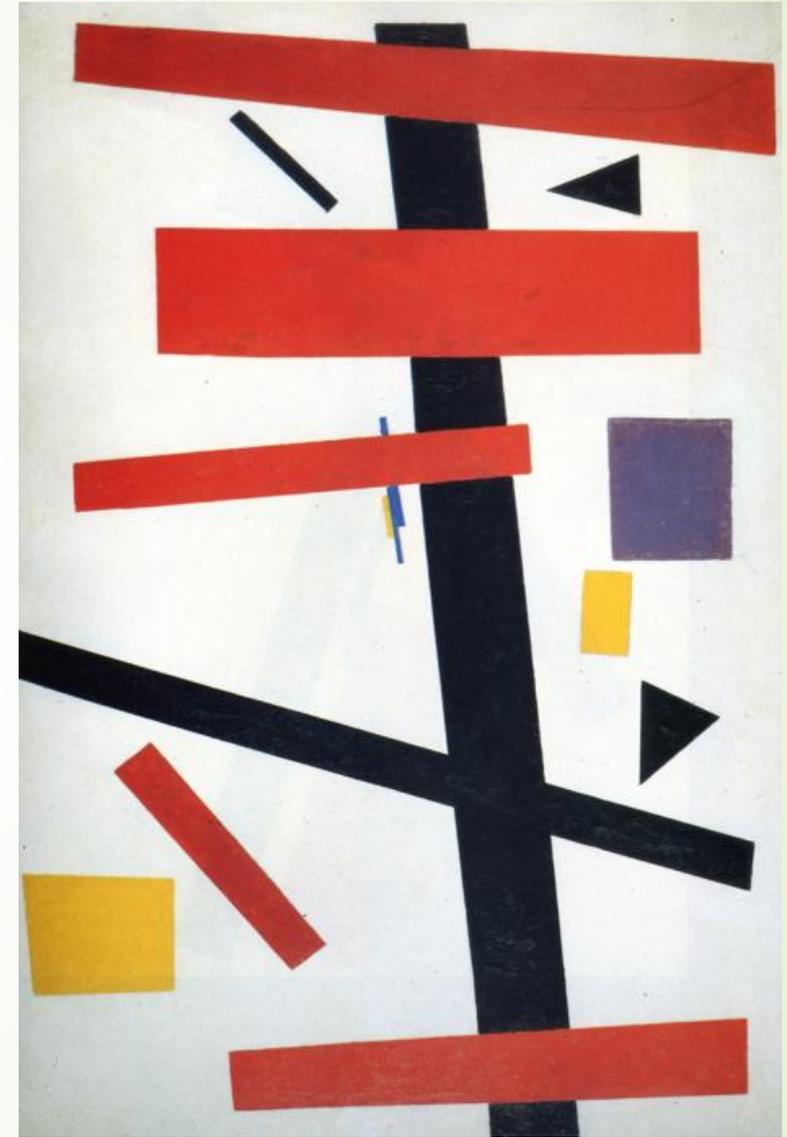


## Suprematist Rituals

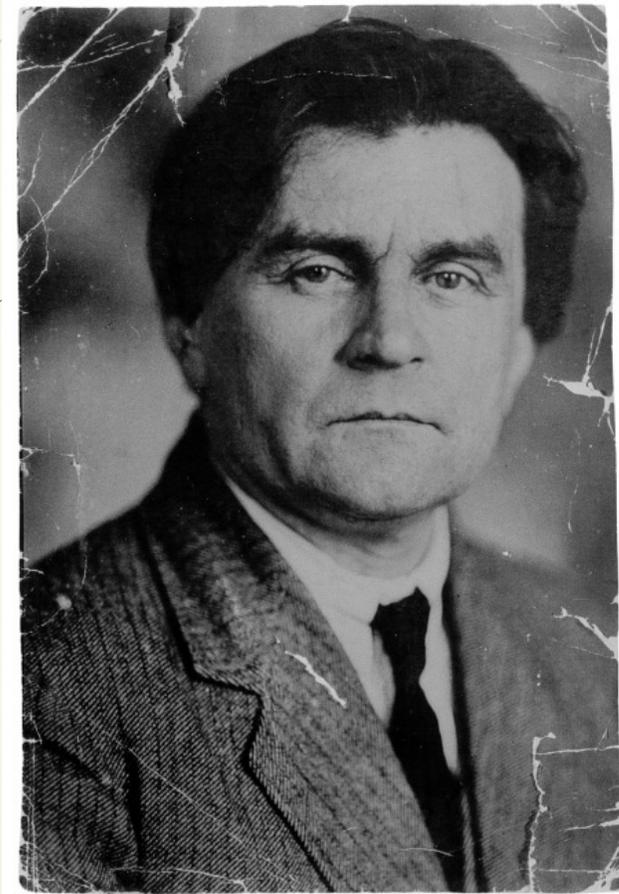
- ▶ Malevich and his followers continued, however, to practice their Suprematist rituals clandestinely. In 1929, when his pupil Ilya Tchashnik (1902-1929) died, Malevich added a Suprematist funeral, whose ritual was used in 1935 for the painter's own obsequies (left). Suprematism as an underground "religion" survived Malevich's death for several decades

# Explicit Religion?

- ▶ Malevich (*Suprematism*, 1915, right) and Abramović, and in a less organized way Mondrian and Pistoletto, offered their modern art as *explicit* religion or spirituality. Although interesting for certain intellectual elites, these “religions” never really became large movements



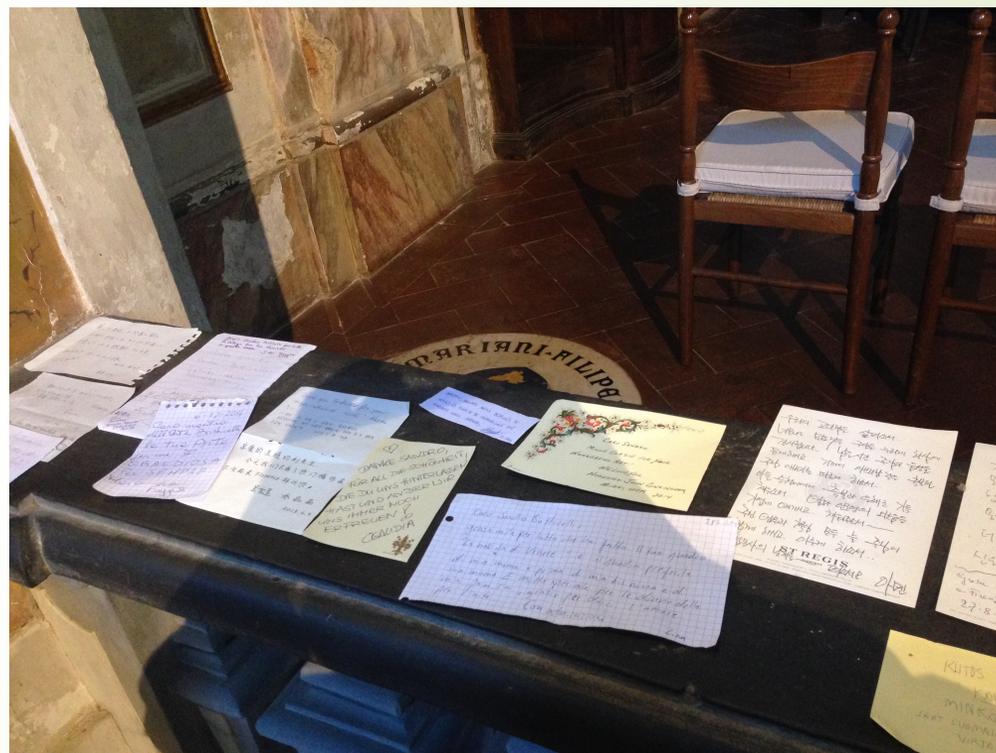
# Implicit Religion?



- ▶ For many who ignore the religious ideas of Mondrian or Malevich (left) altogether, modern art nonetheless generate spiritual emotions and plays the role of what sociologists call *implicit* religion

# The Cult of Botticelli

- ▶ Today, it is not only modern art that plays this role. I took the picture on the right myself in the Ognissanti church in Florence, where many leave notes with prayers and request for help at the grave of Renaissance painter Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510). This is commonly done in the case of Catholic saints in Italy. But Botticelli was not a saint, and the notes reflect a quasi-religious cult of beauty much more than traditional Catholicism



# Sotheby's Version



- ▶ "Art – even in its most secular form – has become the religion of the 21st century. Art meets a spiritual need in people that was previously met elsewhere. It has filled a vacuum in our society left by religion. The great art galleries of the land are its new cathedrals. A large number of the people who a generation or two ago might have taken their children to church on Sundays now take them to an art gallery instead"  
  
(Philip Hook, "From Millet's *The Angelus* to Rothko, why do some works of art make us cry?," *The Independent*, November 5, 2014. Mr. Hook (above) is a director of the international auction house Sotheby's)

# The Mystery of Modern Art



- ▶ Does Mr. Hook exaggerate? Of course. Religion and spirituality have by no means disappeared. But what is true is that in modern art there is a lot of religion, spirituality, mystery, esotericism... Certainly, modern art is not uninterested in the spiritual

J. Cornell, *Home, Poor Heart*, 1962



For more information: [maxintrovigne@gmail.com](mailto:maxintrovigne@gmail.com)

Above: Y. Klein, Ex-voto to St Rita of Cascia (1961)