META-REALISM: THE TRADITION OF POWER/MAGIC IN REPRESENTATIONAL PAINTING

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Brian Curtis *Waiting for Godot* oil on canvas 48” x 72” 1978

META-REALISM:
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Hans Holbein, *St.Thomas More*, Oil on oak, (29.2 in × 23 in), Frick Collection, New York 1527

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Fig. 3, Butterfly Collection

INTRODUCTION

Although my formal study of art has been thorough, it has been incomplete. While it has given me insights by broadening my base of information and experience, there is an issue in art to which I am particularly sensitive that was rarely mentioned, much less investigated. Specifically, I am interested in more fully understanding the expressive power of the image in mimetic or representational painting independent of its formal qualities. Mimetic images are characteristically concerned with direct translation of observable three-dimensional information on a two-dimensional surface. By their very nature these images focus on appearances of individual objects, but by doing so, paradoxically filter out and isolate that which lies behind appearances--the meta-real or ultimate reality. Like a butter fly whose beauty escapes us until it is pinned to the wall, reality must be isolated before it can be understood (Fig. 3). The power inherent in mimetic images that enables us to deal more comprehensively with the intangible qualities of our environment and our experience is one I will term meta-realism. This paper examines this issue by first discussing why the expressive power of imitation has been neglected and then tracing through both ancient and ongoing traditions those levels of communication that are unique to mimetic images.

Fig. 4, William Harnett, *The Old Violin*, National Gallery of Art, oil on canvas
Washington, DC, 1886

CHAPTER 1

OBSTACLES TO UNDERSTANDING MIMETIC IMAGES

I have consistently been fascinated by mimetic paintings, whether they are representations of people, places, or inert material objects. Through childhood memories I recall being mesmerized by the depiction of objects in space by techniques I have since learned to call linear perspective, chiaroscuro and sfumato. These techniques encourage close scrutiny of the images and offer both a sense of privacy and intimacy with the information depicted. That I could actively experience three-dimensional space while looking at an image on a flat surface, presented a contrast that created considerable excitement for me (Fig. 4). The representational image functions as a common boundary between two otherwise exclusive dimensions. I became aware that an image in which there is this juxtaposition -- this interface between two and three dimensions -- acts as a catalyst for increasing my sensitivity to the world around me.

The desire to more fully understand the process by which mimetic images synthesize and enrich experience has been the motivation for my study of art. With this particular interest as my fundamental orientation, I was somewhat unprepared for the attitudes and material that I was exposed to in my studies. Both in studio and art history courses, I came in contact with what I consider to be a basic rejection of representational expression and a trivialization of the of the mimetic

image. In the studio, imitative depictions were negatively characterized as illustrations (and thereby not serious projects or worthy of being considered as Art); and in the classroom the figurative content was at best presented as a third rate consideration after issues of form and style. My readings in art journals and periodicals during this period sustained and reinforced these same restrictive attitudes.

Initially, I was confused when I was confronted with information that was either in conflict with my expectations or simply outside my experience. I felt like the “odd man out” and began to seriously question the validity of my previous experience. This prompted me to undertake an in-depth study of those styles and forms which I intuitively understood the least. Although I never totally denied my previous involvement, I did make a sincere and wholehearted attempt to sensitize myself to the unfamiliar concerns of non-representational art. My investigation into alternative means of expression brought home to me the difficulty we have in not being able to see more than those relation ships or pieces of information that we are prepared to see. As I grad ually developed appropriate expectations, I found that I was able to derive satisfaction from images which earlier had only been a source of bewilderment. My experience here can be understood in terms of the reactions of adults who, blind since birth, have undergone eye transplants. Their initial post-operative reaction is one of panic and confusion because they can make no sense out of stimulation for which they have had no experience. They literally must “learn to see.” In a very concrete way I had had to learn to see the visual information contained in nonrepresentational paintings.

Whereas it may be a rationalization after a rather long and arduous task, I now believe my experience with a variety of modes of expressions has given me a more substantial understanding of art in general. The weaving together of a broad range of information has enabled me to comprehend more clearly the relative strengths of both non-objective and representational art and to appreciate how each takes advantage of unique powers of expression.

Paradoxically, in the course of actively looking into the work of those artists whose orientation or intuition I did not initially comprehend, I came to understand my own intuitions more clearly. In the course of coming full-circle through nonrepresentational and formalist concerns I developed increased sensitivity for the responsibility of the viewer to actively engage the image. In the case of representational images, this pivotal interaction takes the form of imaginative sympathy with the literal content through which the viewer shares the experience of the scene depicted. "Once we are 'set' for this kind of appeal to our imagination we can look through the picture plane into the imagined space and the imagined minds behind the surface." [1] Looking through a picture involves what Coleridge described as a "willing suspension of disbelief" [2] and results in a "feeling of communion between the person and the objects depicted." [3]

1 E. H. Gombrich, Art and Illusion (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1960), p. 137.

2 Ibid., p. 232.

3 Mike Samuels and Nancy Samuels, Seeing with the Mind's Eye (New York: Random House, 1975), p.65

This empathetic viewing process enables a person to incorporate information and experience into his body in a concrete way rather htan as an abstract idea. Empathetic engagement is an experience in which time and space disappear and in which there is no separation between observer and image. Without this willingness to engage the depicted imagery the experience will not take place.

In spite of the long and active tradition of mimetic representational painting going back thousands of years there are several present-day cultural obstacles that make empathetic engagement with representational images problematic. These obstacles are the product of hyper-rationalized approaches in philosophy, theology, art history, and technology that, when combined, restrict our capacity for imaginative, emotional participation. Linda Nochlin suggests, as a result of the conceptualization of art, that we no longer have a vocabulary with which to meaningfully discuss representational painting. [4] If she is correct in stating that we have lost the ability to talk about mimetic works it would explain why the obstacles to participation in mimetic images have gone unchallenged.

Philosophical obstacles to serious involvement with mimetic images come from two polar extremes. On the one side there is Platonic Idealism with its emphasis on the primacy of thought; and on the other there is Materialism with its belief in the primacy of physical matter. These represent the opposite ends of a mind/body dualism that has been the focus of controversy for centuries. These extreme positions simultaneously deny each other and any possible unitive synthesis that might be found in direct perceptual experience.

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4 Linda Nochlin, ‘‘Realist Criminal and the Abstract Law,’’ Art in America 64 (March 1976): 74-76.

Plato wished to banish the artist from his ideal society because he believed that art was guilty of blurring the definition of truth and falsehood. In his thinking, representation of a material object, which was itself only the plastic imitation of a pure idea, was a corruption of the primacy of reason. In so doint these representational pictures appealed to that which he considered the lower part of the soul, our imagination. It was Plato's overemphasis on left-hemispheric, logical, linear brain functioning that was institutionalized into art theory by Roger Fry:

"By creating a dichotomy between 'fidelity to appearance' and 'purely aesthetic criteria' and rejecting representation as a goal of art, Roger Fry laid the foundation stone for the modernist critical position--the ultimate purification of the temple of art from realist profanation." [5]

It is this sort of absolutism that runs the danger of concealing more than it reveals. Working from an inflexible Platonic stance, Fry risks sacrificing much of the spiritual and humanistic tradition in art to an over-reliance on the power of logic. In his book Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, Robert Pirsig presents just such a situation where an over-emphasis on the powers of the intellect leads to an inevitable separation of mind from body. The metaphor that Pirsig uses to describe this imbalance is schizophrenia.

The resultant theoretical fixation on logic has positioned art history as an obstacle when dealing with the value of the mimetic image. Whereas history in general derives its structure from both the primacy of rational thinking and the causal linear

5 Ibid.

character of time, there are levels of experience which are essential to both art and life which resist containment in such a rigid format.

Regardless of how analytical the study of art may be, culture and religion stem from a non-rational source; from that greater part of the human psyche which we now call the unconscious mind. When we find parallels with other peoples and with our own people of other times we are only able to describe it as the working of a common unconscious, a dreamlike universality of understanding which we all share. [6]

Adherence to the linear structure of art history can cause human consciousness to focus on causality and order, and thereby lose sight of its "greatest gift; the openendedness of infinite possibilities." [7] It becomes a situation where the categories are restrictive instead of providing information which can make involvement with images more complete. A system based totally on logic can be misapplied and restrict all information to that of the intellect, even though there is overwhelming evidence which points to the existence of many levels of expression.

No lesson of psychology is perhaps more important for the historian to absorb than the multiplicity of layers, and peaceful coexistence in man of incompatible attitudes. There never was a primitive stage of man when all was magic; there never happened an evolution which wiped out an earlier phase. Different institutions and situations bring out different approaches in which artists and public learn to respond. Beneath these new attitudes or mental sets the old ones survive and come to the surface. [8]

6 Cottie Burland, Gods and Demons in Primitive Art (London: Hamlyn Publishing, 1973), p. 37.

7 Jose Arguelles, The Transformative Vision (Berkeley, Calif.: Shambaala Publications, 1975), p. 26.

8 *Gombrich, p. ll3.*

By neglecting or denying the multiple layers of human experience, art history has fallen into an acute form of Platonic self consciousness. The overdependence on linear, logical thinking inhibits our capacity for imagination and intuition and cuts the present moment off from all relationships and meaning save the causal. This one-sidedness neglects the timeless character and expressiveness of art in favor of how neatly a particular work fits into predetermined categories. [9]

Another philosophical obstacle to the open mindedness comes from the polar opposite of Idealism--Materialism. Materialism reduces fundamental reality to physical matter and suggests that value lies in material well-being and technological progress. Although theoretically both are opposed to one another, Materialism shares a reverence for order through its dependence on technological advances which make the physical environment more controllable. The Materialist theories about art minimalize the importance of the image, and instead focus on the material characteristics of the art process itself. This reduction to material considerations is discussed by contemporary critic Michael Fried in an essay discussing the work of Donald Judd and Robert Morris:

"I take a reductionist conception of Modernist painting to mean this: that painting roughly since Manet is seen as a kind of cognitive enterprise in which a certain quality (e.g. literal ness), set of norms (e.g. flatness) or core of problems (e.g. how to acknowledge the literal character of the support) is progressively revealed as constituting the essence of painting." [10]

9 *Arguelles, p. 260.*

10 Michael Fried, "Shape as Form," New York Painting and Scul}ture: 1940-70, ed. Henry Geldzaaler (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co.,1969 'p. 422

The contemporary Materialist outlook is reflected in the over consumption of goods and the increasing desensitization toward our environment. Within such a framework art becomes a commodity and is heavily influenced by contemporary society's acceptance of "newness" as that characteristic which determines value. The art market in its responsiveness to "newness" at times comes to resemble the fashion industry in its inherent rejection of last year's style. The artist thus becomes a maker of things and his age-old function of expressing non-material concepts is denied. [11] Materialism in its one-sidedness becomes unable to deal with what R. Buckminster Fuller calls "man's unique predisposition toward the metaphysical." [12]

Our contemporary lifestyle is in itself somewhat of a barrier to the level of involvement that imitative images demand. The pace of our daily routine sets up such a rapid-fire succession of stimulation that we can do little more than catalogue the information. As life speeds up, there is naturally less time for engagement of those images which, unlike cinema (invented 1893) and video (1948), call for active viewer participation. With the increase of the "spectator mentality," the willingness and ability to enter into images has decreased. With the gradual reduction of initiative there is a corresponding loss of that communication which is unique to mimetic images.

Technology has also handicapped our understanding of the power of representational painting with the development of photography and its use in mass reproduction of painted images. Photographic reproduction of art began almost as soon as the photographic process was developed in 1839, and was expanded in 1958 by the development of a low- cost full-color printing process.

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11 Burland, p. 9..
12 Arguelles, p. 281

These developments present two specific obstacles. First, they help create a detachment from living historical context. Isolating paintings by means of reproduction emphasizes their status as objects, thereby reinforcing a Materialist point of view. The fact that such reproductions are always in close proximity to words also makes the experience of them too dependent on verbal interpretation. As such, we are conditioned to the notion that art can only be experienced in terms of the sterile categories and classifications to which art history rigidly adheres, suggesting that art evolves only in some linear fashion. Secondly, the reproduction as a surrogate for the original work corrupts the authentic encounter with the actuality of the piece and thwarts the intensity of active participation with it. While attempting to stay mindful of my personal bias, I am inclined to think that there are few ways of working that suffer more from reproduction than representational art. Not only are many of the subtleties of the painting experience lost in translation, but also there is the complicating addition of a second stage of imitation. The delicate juxtaposition of levels of spatial information becomes tangled in a web of misinformation in a process that is cleverly described by John Berger:

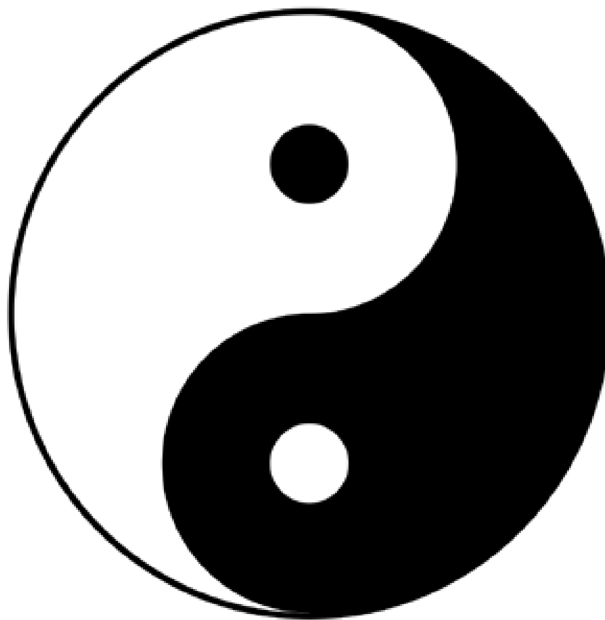
Having seen a reproduction [of the Virgin of the Rocks], one can go to the National Gallery to look at the original and there discover what the reproduction lacks. Alternatively, one can forget about the quality of the reproduction and simply be reminded, when one sees the original, that it is a famous painting of which somewhere one has already seen a reproduction. But in either case the uniqueness of the original now lies in it being 'the original of the reproduction.' It is no longer what its image shows that strikes one as unique; its first meaning is no longer found in what it says, but in what it is. [13]

When we understand that it is the rigidity of the mutually exclusive polarities of Idealism and Materialism that rejects active participation in representational images, it

13 John Berger, Ways of Seeing (Middlesex, England: Pelican Books, 1972), p. 21.

becomes clearer that mimetic depictions function on a level which implies the inter relatedness of both material and spiritual phenomena. This concept parallels the Buddhist emphasis on totality, rather than on any one aspect of a duality. In this philosophy the symbols of the Yin and Yang do not represent absolutes, but rather major aspects of a dynamic unity which are vitally and innately interdependent. Similarly, within the mimetic image the Platonic extremes of matter and spirit fuse. The representational image functions as interface between the two and the experience of this synthesis communicates a fullness unavailable in either element independently. The meta-real interrelatedness contained in this unitive vision is delicately expressed in the Zen poem:

Trees show the bodily form of the wind
Waves give vital energy to the moon [14]



[14] Alan Watts, The Way of Zen (New York: Random House, 1957), p. 119.

The same approach to fundamental harmony of related opposites lies at the base of Christian mysticism. Among the rituals of the Catholic Church, in the sacrament of the Eucharist, transubstantiation takes place in which bread and wine (matter) become the body and blood of Christ (spirit) without changing form (interface). In ancient times the alchemists concerned themselves with this same release of power through matter (Fig 5). Traditionally referred to as "the Art," alchemy sought the transmutation of the human into the divine. It, too, was a conscious pursuit of wholeness through a reconciliation of opposites, a will to harmony. We might say that "religion is the primordial unitive vision, and Art is the expression of such an intuition." [15]

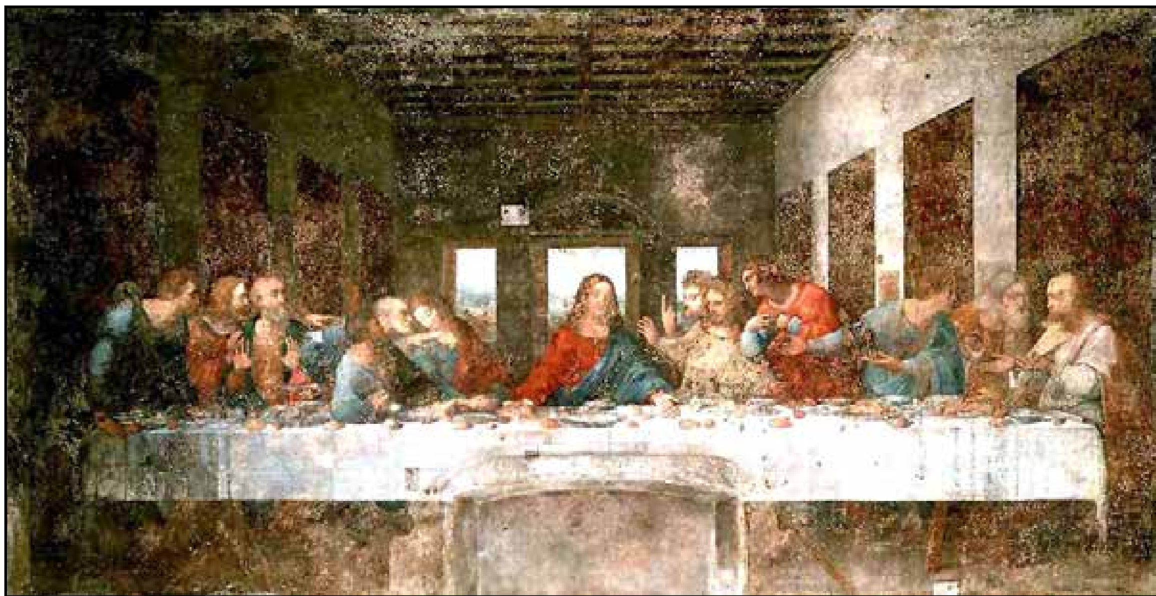


Fig 5, Leonardo da Vinci, *The Last Supper*, fresco, Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan, 1494 - 1498

The release of meta-real expressive power through material is a consistent thread that runs through the tradition of mimetic imagery and reappears time and again in history and myth. By studying these ancient myths and traditions, I was able to develop a fuller appreciation for the energy contained in the images of today.

15 Arguell es, p. 107.

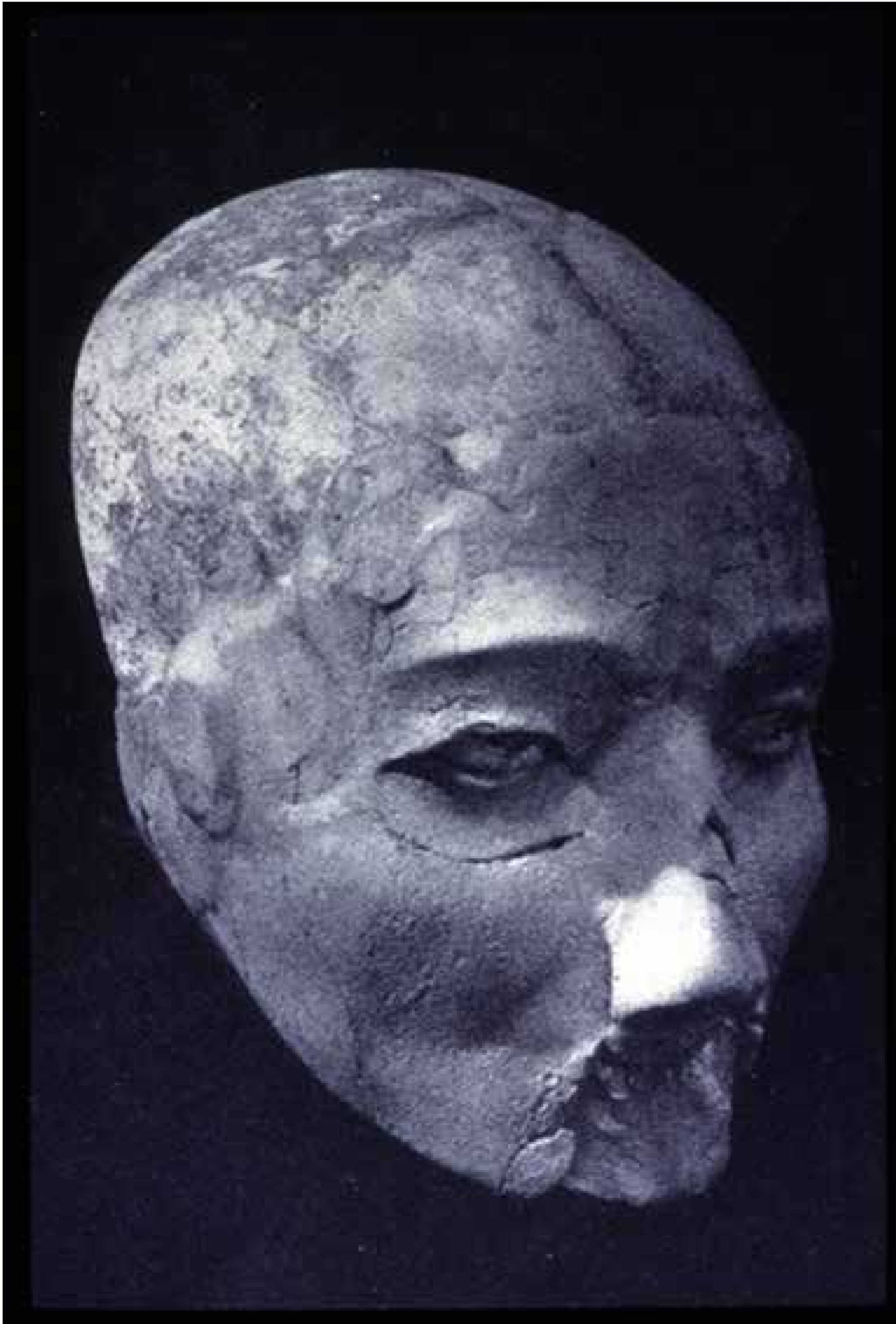


Fig. 6, Plaster applied to Human Skull, Jericho, 8500-7500 BC. Jericho skulls had replications of the deceased sculpted onto the skull. Ancestor-worship. residents of Jericho buried dead family members under floor of household.

CHAPTER II

TRADITION OF POWER/MAGIC IN ANCIENT MIMETIC IMAGES

Because I could find little support in Modern Art theory for the intense experience I derived from mimetic images, I was drawn close to those ancient myths and traditions which focused on a unitive resolution or harmonious integration of the mind/body duality. I have chosen traditions that illustrate the presence of a need in man to come to an understanding of his relationship to cosmic forces through the use of mimetic images (Fig. 6).

In any given time period we have consistent evidence that man has continually used imitation and representational images to solve ontological questions on the nature of being. As Goethe has said, “Art provides the riddles of nature and tries to solve them by means of images.” This common need is traceable in part to our participation in what Carl Jung termed the collective unconscious--that part of the psyche that retains and transmits the common psychological inheriance of man-kind. [l6]

Art History is to be studied because it was the embodiment of ideas and aspirations of human beings at a particular moment in time--and time, like mankind, is indivisible, so that in studying it we study ourselves. [l7]

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16 Carl Jung, ed., Man and His Symbols (London: Aldus Books, 1964) ‘ p. 107.
17 Alan Gowans, The Unchanging Arts (New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1971)’ p.418.

There is a constant thread running through both myth and tradition in which the artist releases spiritual power through efficient use of material by an act of his will. In alchemy the release of this power is magic, in Christianity it is called a miracle, and in the context of mimetic imagery I have referred to it as metarealism. The difficulty today in understanding this power/magic release is not due to the fact that it has ceased to exist, but rather that we have come to be too dependent on the powers of intellect and reason.

We have lost touch with our imagination and our intuition. In order to re-isolate the intense experience that can be found in all mimetic images, I have found it necessary to review the tradition of power/magic in ancient art.

The ancient Greek myth of the sculptor Pygmalion functions as perhaps the best metaphor for the power contained in mimetic images: On this same island of Cyprus there lived a sculptor named Pygmalion. Passionately devoted to his art, Pygmalion was only happy in the silent world of statues that his chisel had created. His misanthropy was attributed to the disgust he felt at the conduct of the girls of Amanithus who rashly denied the divinity of Aphrodite. Thus Pygmalion shunned the society of women, but nonetheless fervently venerated Aphrodite. Now it came about that he made an ivory statue of a woman of such extraordinary beauty that he fell in love with it (Fig. 7).

"Alas! The cold image did not respond to his transports of love. Aphrodite took pity on this singular lover. One day while pressing the inert statue in his arms Pygmalion felt the ivory suddenly moving; his kisses were returned. The statue was miraculously alive." [18]

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[18] New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology, 1968 ed., s.v. "Greek Mythology," by F. Guirand.

Fig. 7, Jean-Leon Gerome, *Pygmalion and Galatea,* oil on canvas, c1890

This myth stands in relation to a rich tradition of myths from all over the world in which artists refrain from putting finishing touches on their images for fear they will either walk away in the night or bring down the jealous wrath of the creative forces of the universe. [19] Pygmalion metaphorically reinforces my contention that active involvement with mimetic images triggers a release of power that I have referred to previously as sympathetic experience. Within the exaggeration of this myth there is the implicit understanding that this meta-real energy, an energy which enriches and intensifies our experience, is contained in imitative representations.

The doctrine of the image in the Early Christian tradition of Byzantine mosaics focuses in much the same way on the synthesizing or integrating nature of mimetic images. This doctrine was a set of beliefs that developed out of church dogma around the time of the Iconoclastic controversies of the eighth and ninth centuries and derived its authority from the mystery of the Incarnation. There had been a conflict between the Iconoclasts, who were opposed to all imitative images, and those who defended them, the Iconodules. The issue pivoted on whether the image of the human Christ could also represent His divine nature (Fig. 8). Since dogma had already determined both natures to exist simultaneously, they concluded that Christ would not have chosen the human image if it were not an effective vehicle for both natures. this doctrine there was a system of iconographic rules which, when followed, made the image a magical counterpart of the prototype (saint, Virgin, Christ) and worthy of veneration. The artist who conceived and created an image according to the prescribed rules was exercising a function similar to that of a priest. [20]

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19 Gombrich, p. 111.
20 Otto Demus, “Byzantine Mosaics,” Readings in Art History, vol. 1, ed. Harold Spencer (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1976)• p. 172.

It is important to remember that in order to achieve its magical identity the image was required to share specific similarity with the prototype in its depiction of characteristic features.

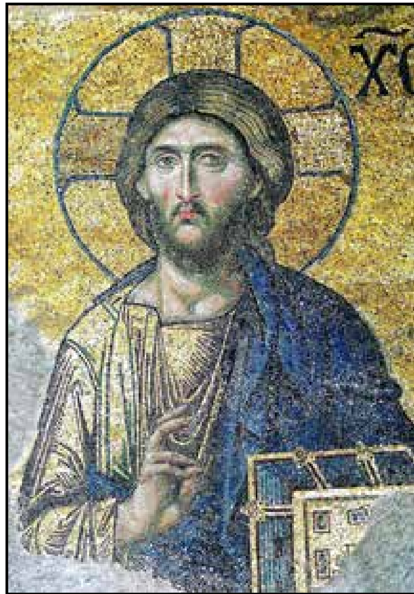
Fig. 8, Christ-Pantocrator, mosaic, unknown-artist, Hagia Sofia, Istanbul, Turkey, 1261

"If it was done according to the rules, the 'magical' identity was established, and the beholder found himself face to face with the holy person or the sacred events themselves through the medium of the image." [21]

This function of the image as medium for direct experience with the prototype seems to be the dominant element in the neolithic cave paintings in Lascaux and Altimira. It seems that art history is more willing to speculate about the motivation for images and their relationship to the totality of the life experience, the further back they exist in time, and if they occurred before the development of what is considered the mainstream of modern western culture. Specula tion suggests that these images were used in power/magic rituals dealing with the control of

21 Ibid., p. 173

natural forces, such as fertility and success of the hunt. The subtle wealth of detail in these cave paintings suggests a sophistication in the eye and hand of the neolithic painter that has made me rethink that which, up to my exposure to these images, had been basically a Darwinian understanding of man's gradual evolution. The sensitivity and immediacy of specific visual information from 30,000 B.C. provides evidence for the realization that the essential concerns and needs of man have not changed. My understanding of the vitality contained in these images is reinforced by the "puncture wounds" that were inflicted by a ritualistic spear. There is no doubt, given this evidence of physical involvement with the image, that neo lithic man was aware of the intimate and unique relation between the prototype and its imitation, which I have called meta-realism.

The use of mimetic images to resolve man's relationship to unknown forces is perhaps most commonly understood in the tradition of memorial images. Cottie Burland states that through this use, "Memorial images are supposed to become physical means by which the soul of the deceased can communicate with living descendants. In every case a sense of communion is established." [22] In Jericho, Jordan, human skulls have been discovered which date back nearly ten thousand years. These skulls have been used as armatures for plaster modeling of human features. These, too, are remarkable because they do not "show a single type; each has a strong individual cast." Seashells have been inlaid for eyes which, while being structurally quite different from eyes, have nonetheless the ability to communicate similarity. The overall imitation is sufficient so that when confronting one of these pieces one is made to deal with a disturbingly human presence.

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22 Burland, p. 37.

The Romans shared a very similar custom, having inherited it from the religious-magical traditions of the Etruscan funerary urns. [23] This tradition culminated in portrait sculpture that is remarkable for what has been termed a "psychological presence." The Roman portrait is a lifelike reproduction of the sitter's every feature, so faithfully rendered that it allows the spectator to speculate for himself on the person's character, viewing its marks in the plastic materials on the face." [24] Romans of nobility maintained "collections" of the portraits of their ancestors in revered places in their homes. Because these representations were held to be the medium through which the ancestors communicated, a treasury of these "living presences" became the source of status and family power (Fig. 9).

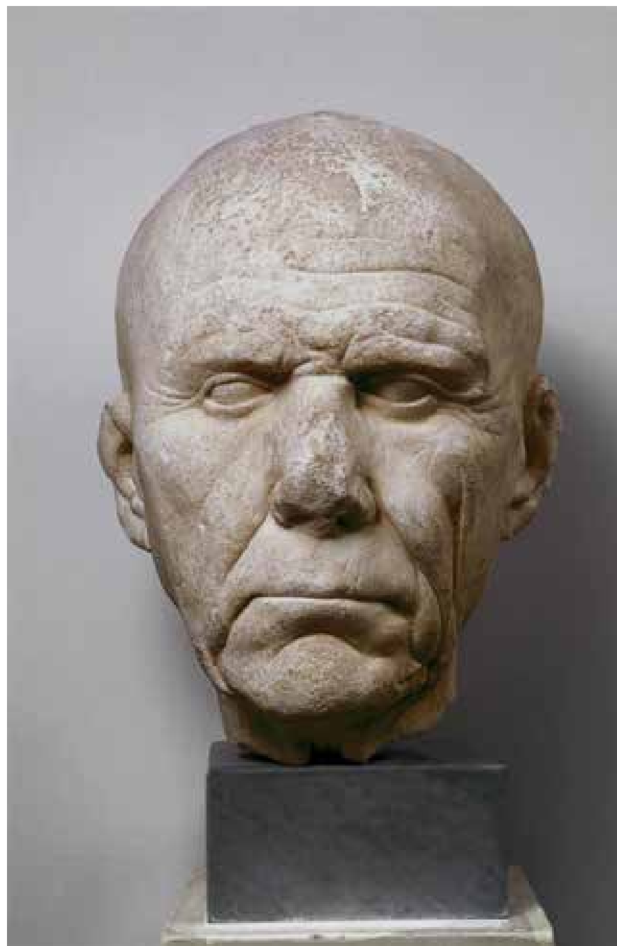

Fig. 9, Head of A Roman Patrician, Rome; 1st c. BC

In the folklore of the Eskimo there is an application of the power of the ancestor image which is immediately tied to their daily experience. In the Nunivak region there is a tale of a hunter who was having difficulty keeping his kayak upright in the water. When his mother-in-law died, a woman of renowned supernatural power, he flayed her skin and attached it spread-eagle to the bottom of his boat. This completely solved his problem. When the skin wore away, the hunter roughly reproduced the details of the flayed skin and attached the imitation to his kay-ak. The imitation was similar enough to capture the magic of the original and his good fortune continued. To this day in that region, the kayaks continue to have the representation of a flayed skin below the water line for the added stability derived from the power of the mother-in law. [25]

Although this story is somewhat grizzly, it is of particular interest in that the function of the image is specific. Imitation becomes the integration of material and spirit and is recognized by the Eskimo to release power/magic. Even though contemporary urban experience would seem to be totally different from that of the Eskimo, I am reminded of man's common need for this kind of expression when I consider the marked parallels between the Eskimo images and the recent American tradition of placing magnetized plastic statues of Christ or medallions of St. Christopher on the dashboards of automobiles in order to insure safety.

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23 H. W. Janson, The History of Art (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962}, p. 22.

24 Germain Bazin, The History of World Sculpture (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphics Society, 1968}, p. 34.

25 Gombrich, p. 111.

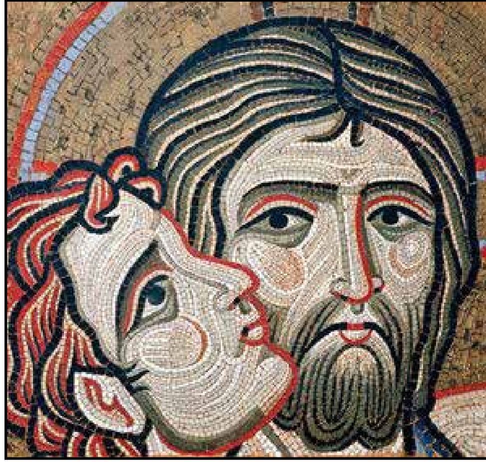
Fig. 10, The Kiss of Judas, Mosaic, St Marks, Venice, 1084-1117

Another tradition which reinforces my argument that there is a meta-real expressive power in the imitative nature of images concerns itself with the popular fear of the “evil eye.” In as much as the mimetic image derives a power from its similarity to the proto type, both Egyptian hieroglyphics and Byzantine mosaics neutralize destructive interaction with negative forces by disfiguring or altering the imitation. It is believed that this intentional dissimilarity prevents the levels of experience from integrating.

In Egyptian tombs this meant that scorpions had no stinging tails and that images of lions were literally divided into two segments. For the beholder of the Byzantine mosaics Judas and Satan were only presented with one eye (Fig. 10).

Within each of these widely different traditions, I find it encouraging to see how consistently the mimetic, imitative quality of an image is understood to be the medium through which expressive power is released. By emphasizing the meta-realistic relationship of the image and its prototype these traditions have given me a perspective from which to consider the many intangible qualities in representational painting that have been so thoroughly neglected.

Fig. 11, Jan Van Eyck, *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait,* Oil on wood, 32 1/4” x 23 1/2”, 1434.

CHAPTER III

META-REALISTIC THEMES IN REPRESENTATIONAL PAINTING

An understanding of the ancient traditions that focus on the inherent expressive power of mimetic images is the mechanism by which we can re-isolate the power/magic tradition in modern representational painting. Painting is by its very nature immediate visual communication. It reveals itself fully at each successive moment, and thereby lends itself to the rejection of the linear time categories so often associated with art. The ability to isolate imitative content and actively involve oneself with it reinforces each painting as a unique solution to "nature's riddles." When focusing in on the imitative quality of an image it becomes possible to group works by thematic content which are ordinarily separated by historical classifications of form, style, or period. By concentrating on what is represented in mimetic images, a rich tradition emerges in which we see a repetition of concerns irrespective of time or place.

Perhaps no common element is as important to the tradition of mimetic representation as its concern with detail. I have often heard it said that nothing is constant save change. It would seem to be equally valid to say that there is nothing as common as uniqueness. It is just this sort of paradox which is so well suited for expression within representational painting--the meta-real common

boundary of contrasting levels of experience. Robert Rosenblum refers to this focus on uniqueness as "a magical scrutiny of the microcosm." [26]

This encounter with the particular is nowhere more intense than in the paintings of Jan Van Eyck (Fig. 11). Whether it be a consideration of the con vex mirror on the rear wall in the Arnolfini Wedding Portrait or the magnification of the typeface under the eyeglass lens in the Van der Paele Madonna, the only obstacle to finding even more revealing detail is the physical barrier our noses touch when meeting the surface of the painting. This remarkable detail creates a realism of particulars which reflects the unitive vision of the macrocosm being contained in the microcosm. Through his concentration on minute detail, he expresses the interrelatedness of matter and intangible cosmic order in a way that is fascinatingly similar to some recent discoveries in physics:

The whole of the universe may be contained in every part. Mach's principle states that the mass of a single particle is determined by the mass of the entire universe; therefore, the mass of a single particle contains information about the entire universe.

The universe may function as a giant hologram, in which the part contains the whole. A common example is the optical holo gram, where a photographic transparency records an interference pattern between two components of a split laser beam. When a laser beam is projected through the developed transparency, a three-dimensional wavefront reconstruction of the photographed object occurs.

The amazing property of the hologram is that if we cut a small piece from the photographic transparency and expose that piece to the coherent laser beam, we still see an entire three-dimensional reconstruction of the photographed object. That is, any small piece of the photographic trans parency (hologram) contains complete information on the object. The part contains the whole. [27]

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26 Robert Rosenblum, Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition (New York: Harper & Row, 1975 , p. 141.
27 Bob Toben, Space-Time and Beyond (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1975), p. 141.

The meta-realistic interrelatedness of each individual detail to the wholeness of the universe has a long-standing tradition in American painting, and is clearly illustrated in the works of William Harnett and John F. Peto. Both painters specialized in trompe l'oeil effects and have interestingly been classified as Magic Realists. The term "magic" refers appropriately to the intensity of the "thereness," the illusionistic presence contained in the images. The modern context seems to intend magic to be a pejorative classification, but in fact it is a persistent indication of the expressive power of an age-old tradition. The sharp focus painters of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood had intuitively arrived at a similar under standing. The quantity and clarity of detail in William Holman Hunt's *Scapegoat* will rival the precision of any mimetic painting. Understandably, the attempt to re-affirm the inherent power/magic of mimetic images was an acknowledged goal of the Brotherhood.

Certainly another reinforcement of the belief that meta-real or intangible issues are contained in representational paintings is found in realism's frequent depiction of the theme of death. Through Manet's *Dead Toreodor*, David's *Death of Marat*, and Courbet's *Funeral at Ornans* the facts of death speak most profoundly and clearly when speaking for themselves. This choice by realists to depict the aspect of life which is the interface of time and eternity is very much in keeping with the notion that we can more fully understand our relationship to the cosmic by detailed representational images of concrete, optical facts.

The ongoing tradition of individualistic portraits is a theme in which the accumulation of detailed visual information is obviously able to communicate not only the description of flesh, but of personality and living energy as well. The energy-emoting qualities of the best of these share directly in the myth of Pygmalion.

Perhaps nowhere else in mimetic representation is this meta-realistic experience so immediate and accessible. The intangible vitality asserted itself unforgetably when I first encountered Hans Holbein's *St. Thomas Moore* at the Frick Museum in New York. My exposure to this piece followed two semesters of undergraduate indoctrination in Modern Art theory where I was being told that painting no longer need concern itself with detail now that photography supplied the same information better and easier. In the rarefied atmosphere of a sophomore painting studio this had begun to seem accurate. While not attempting to deny the power of the photographic image, this face-to-face encounter with St. Thomas Moore triggered a reaction in me that previously I had only experienced when actually confronting people. It was a memorable experience to say the least. My reaction can be supported by recent experiments in physiology in which internalized images have been found to effect voluntary and involuntary bodily functions in ways similar to interaction with the physical environment. [28]

A similar sort of encounter took place several years later at the downtown gallery of 0. K. Harris in New York. I had brought several friends to this gallery to show them a John D'Andrea sculpture, *Sleeping Woman on a Bed* that I had had a somewhat uncomfortable encounter with several weeks earlier in a back gallery thinking I had stumbled into someone's living quarters (Fig. 12). The back gallery, which had been open for browsing the month before, was, on this particular day, closed-off by to visiitors by a retaining rope across the entrance. Immediately behind the rope, in the middle of the doorway stood a workman leaning against his hand truck. From where we were, the workman's position made it all but impossible to see the sculpture I had wanted to point out, so we turned to go. As we

28 Mike Samuels and Nancy Samuels, p. 79.

Fig. 12, John D'Andrea, Woman Sleeping on a Bed, polyvinyl, circa 1976

Fig. 13, Duane Hanson, Workman with Handtruck, 1975

walked away, we stopped in unison and, somewhat stunned, we turned together to view what now revealed itself to be Duane Hanson's *Workman with Hand Truck (Fig. 13)*. As we studied the image, we were continually fascinated by the wealth of minute, particular detail which only moments before had blended into a breathing presence. The involvement with this delicately painted plastic image was repeatedly intensified as the image periodically re-assumed the vitality we had confronted earlier.

The realist concern for factual representation as the medium for understanding intangible experience takes on added dimension when the image content concerns psychological extremes. The fundamental character of the mimetic image as interface makes it particularly suitable for illustrating the delicate distinction between normalcy and various extremes of personality. A series of portraits painted by Gerricault were attempts at clinical studies of the insane. In that his portraits present only engaging images of intense, eccentric personalities, we find a clear testament to the fine line that separates those

levels of experience. The American artist, Diane Arbus, made a career out of photographing social, psychological and physical misfits. Her ability to capture this non-alignment in the detail of the world around her gives the work a devastating impact (Fig. 14).

Fig. 14, Diane Arbus, Child with Toy Hand Grenade in Central Park, New York City (1962)

She has said about her work:

For me the subject of the picture is always more important than the picture, and more complicated. I do have a feeling for the print but I don't have a holy feeling for it. I really think that is what it is about. I mean it has to be of something. And what it is of is always more remarkable than what it is. [29]

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29 Diane Arbus, Diane Arbus (Millerton, New York: An Aperture Monograph, 1972), p. 15.

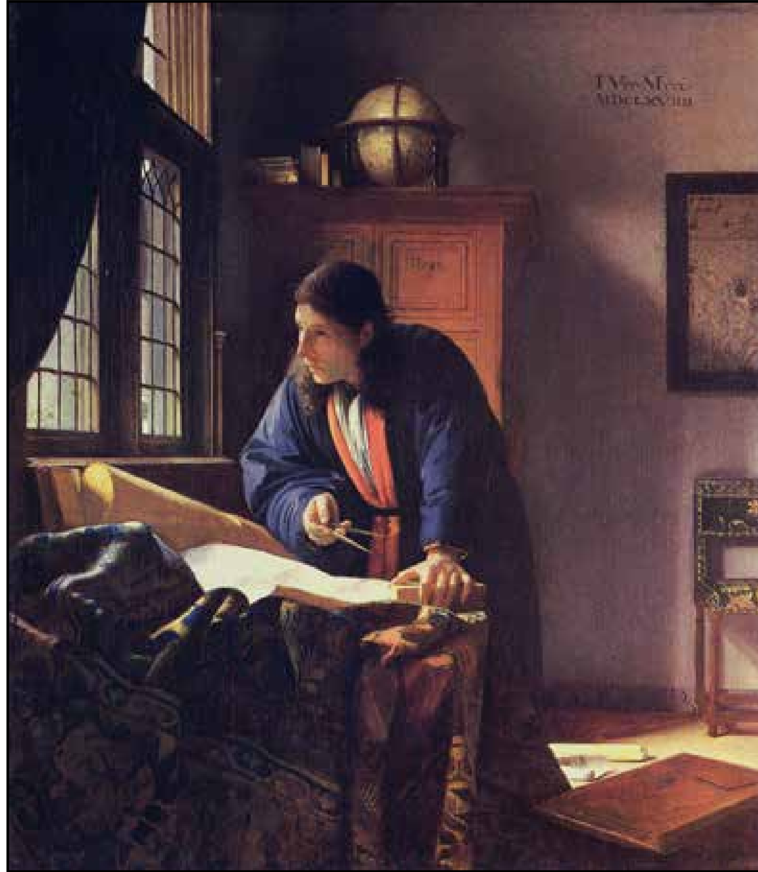

Fig. 15, Johannes Vermeer, T*he Geographer,* oil on panel, 1669)

In contrast to mimetic images that focus on the dynamic energy of the human personality, there is a tradition in which representations of the man-made environment are used to express an overall sensation of silence or stillness. The stillness found in the best of these images is so complete and positive that the stillness has the crispness of a crystal bell. Foremost among the works which embody silence are those of Jan Vermeer (Fig.15). The clarity of the space in his interiors, combined with an ambient, honeylike light, magically transform the domestic interiors into tabernacles containing what Christian mystic, Jacob Boehme, called the “essenceless quiet.”

Fig. 15, Edward Hopper, *New York Movie*, oil on canvas, *1939*

Fig. 16, Richard Estes, Helene's Florist, oil on canvas, 1971

Both Edward Hopper and Richard Estes (Figs. 15, 16) have found, in the imagery of the urban landscape, a evocative stillness that promotes a meditative-like contemplation of our environment. The meta-real quality of Hopper is emphasized by his continual use of the contrast inherent in depicting interior and exterior space simultaneously. This theme reinforces the very power/magic in the nature of the painting itself by drawing attention to the function of the mimetic image as interface between two layers of experience. Certainly this same multiplicity of

experience is the dominant element in the cityscapes of Richard Estes. By concentrating on reflections in plate glass windows and in polished surfaces of urban architectural materials, he expands the experience so that we not only enter into a purified encounter with the materials depicted before us, but also, because of the nature of reflections, become actively aware of a presence behind us. In Telephone Booths we are confronted with a delicate interplay of representations of concrete materiality, opaque reflections, and transparent reflections that activates the imagination as powerfully as it entertains the eye.

Fig. 17, Andrew Wyeth, *Anna Kuerner,*
tempera, 1971 1976

Where Hopper and Estes cause us to contemplate the urban environment, Andrew Wyeth meticulously renders the details of rural America. In his portrait of Anna Kuerner he combines many powerful themes of this mimetic tradition (Fig. 17) . He blends the vitality of the portrait with the spiritual experience we can take from a bleak horizon visible through a sun-drenched window frame. All of these elements mutually amplify the intensity of the meta-realistic participation with this image. They focus on the spirit of the objects depicted which, as Wyeth said, “if you sit long enough, will finally creep through the back door and grab you.” [30]

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30 Thomas Hoving, Two Worlds of Andrew Wyeth (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1978), p. 22.

Perhaps it is the materialistic tenor of the time; that if we can deal with the physical substance of the thing, the paint, surface, shapes, etc., we will come to know what it is that mimetic images mean. By identifying the tangible material aspects, we will understand the intangible. But, if instead of looking materialistically at the image, we consider it in good faith--as early Christians used to accept the icon as truth -- then perhaps we will perceive the true meaning of the work. By focusing on the spiritual nature of art as a release of energy, I sense that the power/ magic that was once so profoundly the experience of art, can and does survive in the living tradition of representational painting. Our reluctance to experience this more profound meaning in mimetic imagery is a sign of our own lack of faith as an audience and not a failure of the artist who continues to work in this tradition.

In the final analysis it is not argumentation with the theories opposed to representation or documentation of supportive ancient myths and traditions which will reveal the power/magic contained in mimetic images -- it is only be experienced through active participation and an open mind.

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