

## EYES FOR ART

Adapted from  
*AN ART OF OUR OWN: THE SPIRITUAL IN TWENTIETH—CENTURY ART*

--by **Roger Lipsey**

Eyes for art. The phrase occurred to me while reading a letter by Thomas Merton in Msgr. William H. Shannon's recent selection from his correspondence. Speculating on a topic all too obvious in its answer, Merton asked Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy's widow, Dona Luisa Coomaraswamy:

What would you say AKC would have thought of abstract expressionism in art? It has much to be said in its favor, but as a fashion it is a bit obnoxious. What did he think and say about people like Picasso, who is undoubtedly a great genius...but perhaps that is the trouble.<sup>1</sup>

Merton's simple comments reveal keen "eyes for art" and a monk's knowledge of painting.

The phrase in fact owes a debt to Henri Corbin, a most unusual student of Islamic religious history, who once called attention to a Sufi text that contrasts "eyes of flesh" and "eyes of fire."<sup>2</sup> Eyes of flesh perceive the world and mankind as densely material; in such eyes life is a losing struggle for permanence, although sometimes full of beauty. Eyes of flesh acutely perceive details of time, place, person, action, and idea, but in relation to one another rather than to anything beyond them.

Eyes of fire perceive each thing as the outer sign of an inner fact, or the local sign of a distant power. For such eyes nothing is lonely matter, all things are caught up in a mysterious, ultimately divine whole that challenges understanding over a lifetime. Eyes of flesh focus on the thing itself, eyes of fire on facts but still more intently on their participation in a larger meaning by which they are raised.

Merton's brief reflections evoke the idea that eyes *for art* strike a balance between these kinds of sensibility. They are at one and the same time eyes of flesh and eyes of fire. They are surely eyes of flesh because artists and those who love art are willing conspirators in the world of matter; such people are entranced by things as they are and as they might become, in their frail beauty and unrepentant materiality. Moreover, they are fond of technique, cherish a craftsman's fascination with the right way of doing things. Technical concerns, ranging from the correct way to render the curvature of a rose petal to the correct positioning of dynamite charges in an

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, selected and edited by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985): p. 129.

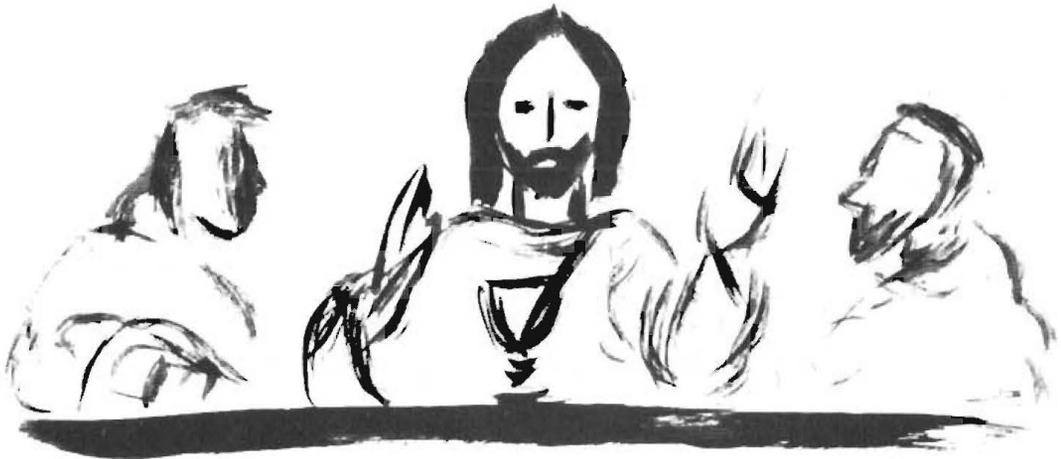
<sup>2</sup> Henri Corbin, "Eyes of Flesh and Eyes of Fire: Science and Gnosis," in *Material for Thought*, No. 8, 1980, pp. 5-10 (an occasional publication of Far West Institute, San Francisco).

architectural excavation, are not matters for apology among them. On the contrary, such things are in their life's blood.

But there is sometimes more than that. Developed eyes for art measure not only the distance between two points but, so to speak, their common distance from God. They see the form, and then its power as a symbol for some part of life or for the whole. A tower is not only an impressive pile of brick or stone; it is a vertical avenue between the lower and the higher. The question to be asked of it is how effectively and with what new insight it expresses this larger function. A sculpture is not just a technical accomplishment and a lovely or intriguing object. It is also a message conveyed by the sculptor to himself and all selves about the nature of things.

Encompassing these poles, eyes for art can never really rest. There can never be enough knowledge of matter, and never enough of spirit; never enough, then, of their relation in life as in art. One of the great and rather sad secrets of art is that ordinary reality goes largely unobserved. The artist who truly sees a flower, a dingy street, a face, or a hillside is already reaching beyond most of us. He or she is turned in the direction of epiphany. Moses standing within sight of the burning bush realized that he stood on sacred ground and removed his sandals. This is the realization of every artist who possesses in some degree both eyes of fire and eyes of flesh.

All of this was evident to Merton. In the modest passage that kindled these reflections, he can be sensed reaching for a clear perception of the physical, paint-and-brush reality of art, and reaching no less actively for insight into its underlying seriousness, its place in the scheme of things.



Drawing by  
THOMAS MERTON