

# On Noetic Vision in Sacred Art: A Letter

By Hieromonk Silouan

**A** while back a friend visited our monastery for a few days. At the time we conversed about sacred art and the process of expressing archetypal realities through pictorial form. Months passed and he wrote to me asking, "Have you come across anything...that has shed any light on the question? The question, as I understood it then, was how one moves from a vision of Reality to its artistic expression, especially considering that the one is intelligible and invisible, and the other sensible, visual. I would be interested to hear... what new insights with regards to this topic you have gained over the past many months." The following are the thoughts I wrote back to him. Although this is the second letter on the subject, I believe it handles the complexities of the creative act more fully than our first correspondence.<sup>1</sup> Herein the term "noetic vision of archetypes" is qualified, the notion of "abstracting the universal from the particulars" is

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<sup>1</sup> The first correspondence begins as follows, "It is a question about the "creative act" in iconography, the icon being the symbol that manifests the archetype. In most of the literature about icon painting you encounter a retelling of the conciliar and patristic definition of the icon—its theology in light of the Incarnation. It is less common to encounter writings on the artistic side of the matter, that is, the kind of thinking and process of formal articulation that unfolds in the painter as he works, a *noetic* work. It goes without saying that, since it is an inner work, it is mostly shrouded in mystery. Within the Orthodox tradition there seems to be little available on the topic, at least in English translations. The Hindu and Buddhist tradition delve into these matters more clearly, with a history of clearly defined aesthetics (See Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Dance of Shiva*). They have been around for a while so they have had the time to elaborate things a bit more thoroughly. Anyhow, the question as you put it is always in the back of my mind. I'm always looking for information on the topic, so far Coomaraswamy has been the most helpful."

*examined, and the role of geometry in iconographic representation is further expanded. This is all discussed in light of icon painting, but the general principles pertain to sacred art in general. Whenever contextualization of the discussion is necessary it will be provided in the footnotes as fragments of the previous letter.*



Dear C,

I should begin by a clarification of the term, “noetic vision of archetypes.” The term “noetic vision” might be confused with the notion of contemplation, a word that has to be interpreted in context and which tends to conjure up so many vague ideas that it becomes almost meaningless. Let us look at some definitions.

The state of contemplation (*theoria*), as described by the fathers of the *Philokalia*, is a perception or vision of the *nous* (intellect), through which spiritual knowledge is obtained; it is not of our own doing, but is granted by grace to the pure of heart. Contemplation in this sense is usually divided into two main stages: vision of the inner principles (*logoi*/archetypes), or hidden nature of created beings, and theology proper, the vision of God.<sup>2</sup> Origen gives as an example of the first stage Isaac, who is, “an exponent of natural philosophy, when he digs wells and searches out the root of things.”<sup>3</sup> He sees the second stage exemplified in Moses, who entered the dark cloud and beheld the burning bush, Paul, who in ecstasy saw the third heaven, and St. John the Theologian who leaned on the Lord’s bosom and received the Revelation.<sup>4</sup>

Contemplation presupposes praxis, the active life of virtue, *nepsis* or watchfulness, repentance, purification from the passions, perfection of Christian love and requires detachment. As Ilias the Presbyter says in his *Gnomic Anthology*, “The inner principles of corporeal things are concealed like bones within objects apprehended by the senses: no

<sup>2</sup> See Glossary in *The Philokalia Vol. Three*, Faber and Faber, Inc., London and Boston, 1984, pp. 356-57.

<sup>3</sup> As quoted in *The Westminster Handbook to Origen*, edited by John McGuckin, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville and London, 2004, p. 82.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

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