Mircea Eliade's Love of Art

Mac Linscott RICKETTS

Art and artists interested him greatly, as another manifestation of the religious spirit, and not only an aesthetic phenomenon[1]

. . . So testified recently a woman, herself an artist and writer, a resident of Paris, who knew Mircea and Christinel Eliade well and had visited them in their home*s*, both in Paris and in Chicago. Was it indeed true, that art interested Eliade, not only as an aesthetic phenomenon, but also as a "manifestation of the religious spirit"?

It will come as no surprise to Romanian readers of this article that Eliade loved art, but some may be astonished at the amount of time the historian of religions and writer devoted to visiting art museums, exhibitions, and ancient cathedrals, in order to nourish his soul on the works of graphic and plastic arts that were found there. To be sure, Eliade's enthusiasm for "art" was by no means confined to these forms only, for indeed all kinds of artistic phenomena pleased him: music (classical especially, but not exclusively), theater, ballet, architecture, folk arts, and, of course, literature, which he himself wrote in every genre save poetry. All art, in his view, was, "in its beginnings," sacred, and was one instance of the divine's manifestation in the world. But it also arose from the the artist's creative imagination, and Eliade admired and loved all forms of it. But "art," in the more limited sense of painting, was (after literature), Eliade's great passion.

In Eliade's *Journal*, from 1940-1985[2], which constitutes the principal source of this paper, there are more than fifty references to visits made to art museums and exhibitions, and to old cathedrals and churches containing works of art. During the same time period, he mentions attending perhaps 12-15 instrumental or vocal concerts, dance performances, and plays. To be sure, the *Journal* is by no means a complete, day-by-day record of its author's activities, and at points there are rather large lacunae. Since visits to museums such as the Louvre in Paris and the Metropolitan in New York were commonplace events in his life, we can assume that in many instances they were not recorded in the *Journal.* But those that were recorded are quite enough to demonstrate Eliade's true love of fine art.

From his earliest journey outside Romania (to Italy, 1927), Eliade sought out places where works of art could be viewed and contemplated. At Venice, in April 1927, he visited the Accademia delle Belle Arti, and was able to spend some time in front of

[1] "Arta şi artiştii îl interesau mult, ca o altă manifestare a spiritului religios, şi nu numai ca un fenomen estetic," Sanda Nițescu, *Câteva mărturii despre Mircea Eliade*, in „Vatra", 6/7, Summer, 2000: 111.

[2] I refer here and throughout this paper to the *complete* journal, most of which has not been published. The manuscript of the *Journal* is found in the Regenstein Library, the University of Chicago, Section of Special Papers, to which I have had access through permission granted me by the late Christinel Eliade in 1996. Translations are my own.

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certain canvasses that he had wanted to see – even though he was constantly annoyed by noisy, bustling tourists following their Baedekers. In addition, he marveled, with the others, at the Piazza San Marco and the Basilica[3]. At Florence, the young Eliade attempted to admire at close range the famous Baptistry of San Giovanni and Ghiberti's East Door of the cathedral, but again the crowds of tourists prevented him from meditating on these wonders as he wished. At the galleries where he went later[4], he complains that the tourists "can't appreciate them [the paintings] until they find out who painted them." Those who have memorized their guidebooks take pride in engaging their friends in learned discussions, he comments sarcastically. When these "Baedeker scholars" praise enthusiastically a work of art, Eliade declares that he can no longer enjoy it. "In museums, with the group, I do not find the peace and quiet necessary to initiation, but only a disgusting vulgarization."

Eliade and his group (students and teachers) visited several other cities on the 1927 tour, but he makes no further mention of art museums. That summer he spent two months on a League of Nations scholarship, and the next spring he did research for his *liceu* thesis in Rome, but his concerns on these trips were focused on his studies, and we read nothing further about artistic contemplations.

During the three years he spent in India (1929-1931), he lived, in a sense, in a "museum of Oriental art." He had ample opportunity to observe *living* sacred and folk art, and he returned to Romania with a deep and abiding appreciation for it. He published two perceptive essays on Indian art and iconography that first appeared in "Cuvântul" in 1932, and were later reprinted in *Insula lui Euthanasius*[5]. Contrasting the Indian and Western artist, Eliade says: "Whereas the European artist imitated the creations of nature and tried to reproduce its forms […], the Indian artist imitated the *gesture* of nature and created on his own account. […] The European offers an aesthetic thrill; the Indian offers more: a sentiment of full harmony with nature, of equality with and love for all her creations." With regard to the sculptor, Eliade declares that the artist "conforms to a well-established hieratic canon and expresses neither his personal emotions nor the beauty of nature." The result "does not conduce to aesthetic feeling, but to a sentiment of reconciliation and perfection, the point of departure for a spiritual ascent which far transcends profane art."

In these comments on art forms of India, does Eliade mean to say that Indian art is "sacred," drawing forth religious feelings, whereas Western art is "profane" because it evokes only aesthetic emotions? It would seem so; but in view of Eliade's great appreciation of his own Occidental heritage expressed elsewhere, I would say that these exceptional statements are born of an exuberance carried over from his "Indian experience." He is exhibiting here his understanding, so rare for a European, of the intended meaning of Indian works of art – usually dismissed by Occidentals as "idols".

[3] See *Jurnal de vacanţă*, edited by Mircea Handoca, Bucureşti: Garamond International, 1995: 10-11. The accounts of Eliade's visits abroad, 1927-28, reprinted here, first appeared as articles in "Cuvântul".

[4] Pelazzo Pitti (Renaissance and Baroque) and Uffizi (Baroque), *Ibid*, 23-26.

[5] *Note despre arta indiană*,12 October 1932, and *Note de iconografie indiană*, 20 October 1932. Rep. in Eliade, *Insula lui Euthanasius*, Bucureşti: Fundaţia Regală pentru Literatură şi Artă, 1943: 309-19. In English in Eliade, *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts*, ed. by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, New York: Continuum, 1992: 72-80.

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I know of only one other place where Eliade makes a comparison of Eastern and Western art, unfavorable to the latter, and that is in a journal entry from Paris of 27 September 1946. Strolling through the St. Sulpice neighborhood, he became indignant at the display of cheap religious *objets d'art* in shop the windows. He calls it a manifestation of "fetishism," and "regression into infantilism and sentimentalism": "all those mangers with babes and asses, plastic Virgins and saints, standing in a row." It reminds him of the "dubious devotion" of Vaishnavites in India, "sometimes poured out in sentimentalism and eroticism." (He is referring here, probably, to the popular cult of Radha and Krishna.) Still, he insists, Indians' concept of hierophanies is more profound than that of the average Christian for whom these toy-like images "narrate the miracle of the Nativity and the mystery of the Holy Passion in a profane way […], not even as a mythology."

In both of these comparisons of Indian and Western art, Eliade speaks of "sacred" versus "profane." In the former (the articles of 1932), sacredness seems to be determined by the artist's adherence to canonical models and the potential of the art to elevate one to spiritual heights; in the latter, it arises from the genuinely mythological content and understanding of the art. Are these qualities not also present in at least *a part of* Western art? Indeed, Eliade would agree, and it was because they were, I believe, that he spent so much time with the works of the great masters, and that he looked with deep appreciation upon folk art.

In his memoirs, Eliade recalls a brief trip to London in 1936, made as a delegate to a meeting of the idealistic "Oxford Group Movement." Although he was there only a few days, he not only examined libraries and bought books, but he also visited art museums[6].

On his summer vacation the next year, he and his wife Nina toured southwestern Germany, but only after first passing through Venice for the express purpose of seeing a special Tinteretto exhibit. Young artists from Milan had come there too, to mock certain of the artist's paintings: in particular, one depicting St. Mark descending from heaven to perform a miracle. Eliade comments extensively on this impressive painting, which he calls "The Miracle of the Slave"[7]. Obviously, Eliade admires this work greatly.

Soon after arriving in Portugal (in February 1941) to serve as press secretary (later cultural counselor) at Romania's Legation, Eliade made a major tour of part of the country, to the north of the capital. He kept a detailed travel diary, from which he developed an article describing, primarily, Vizeu with its cathedral and the art museum of Vasco Fernandes, "The Great." At the cathedral, the first thing he notices are the Manueline[8] knots on the arches. Then the carvings on the choir chairs capture his attention:

"The backs and arms are decorated with faces and bodies of a rare, surprising beauty: demons, chimeras, goats, dragons, fish, and heads of the damned. [...] The incomparable courage and genius of the carver who has animated the hard, smooth wood of the chairs with all these stares and grins and monsters! […] Over each chair, supporting a chain of trumpets and seaweeds, there bends the body of a woman with

[6] *Autobiography*, I, New York: Harper and Row, 1981: 313; *Memorii*, I, Bucureşti: Humanitas, 1991: 345.

[7] Also known as "The Miracle of St. Mark" (1548). This visit to the Tinteretto exhibit is part of the only fragment of Eliade's *Journal* from the 1930s extant, having been preserved because it was published in periodicals: "Vremea", 15 August, 12 September, and 10 October 1936; and "Universul literar", 29 July and 26 August 1939. Republished in *Autobiography,* I: Appendix, 21-26; *Jurnal de vacanţă*, 89-95.

[8] An elaborate style, unique to Portugal, named for King Manuel I (1495-1521) who ruled when the style developed. Inspired by Portuguese navigators, it incorporates nautical motifs.

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bare and well-rounded abdomen. I wonder what these women could possibly signify, whose bellies remind me of prehistoric idols, the Venus de Willendorf, or some other Eurasiatic Magna Mater"[9].

The Grão Vasco Museum impressed Eliade to an exceptional degree. "There are so many [art] museums about which I've written nothing in this notebook that I can't let myself forget the museum of the Great Vasco Fernandes." He calls it the second most beautiful museum in the country – after the Janelas Verdas Museum in Lisbon (with which, evidently, he is quite familiar already). "What bothers me about all of Vasco's paintings is not the realism with which he treats his subjects [...], but the *ugliness* of his characters. From the Savior in 'The Baptism' to the soldiers and Pharisees in the extraordinary 'Calvary,' Vasco's countenances reflect the same great, entrenched ugliness," Eliade writes. Their ugliness is not, however, demonical or caricatural, like those of Bosch of Breugal, he explains, but it is only the result of a lifetime of labor. There are two exceptions: St. Sebastian, the martyr, and St. Peter, depicted as a glorious king on a throne, symbolizing the triumph of the Catholic Church. Eliade sees him as a "true Cosmocrator, the Universal Monarch establishing law everywhere." Otherwise, the faces painted by Vasco reflect the visages he knew among his contemporaries in the sixteenth century, the age of exploration and colonization. This characteristic, in fact, marks all the Portuguese artists of that era, Eliade admits[10].

During these years of residence in Portugal, Eliade visited Spain five or six times, thanks to friends in the Romanian Legation at Madrid. His journal records visits to cathedrals and churches, whose architecture and interiors he admires. In November 1942[11] he comments on paintings seen in the thirteenth-century Cathedral of St. Juan de Reis at Toledo, richly adorned with tapestries, stained-glass windows, and paintings by famous artists: Titian, Murillo, Goya, El Greco, and others. But he does not like the Chapel of St. Thomas (which guidebooks praise): he describes its interior as "of the most vulgar baroque style," a product of the Counter-Reformation. On another trip to Spain, in April 1943, Eliade notes visiting at least six churches, and he comments on one or more works of art seen at each. In Spain, again the following month, he is impressed by a painting of the Virgin at the Colegio San Felipe de Negri, in Cádiz[12].

When the German political theorist, Carl Schmitt, visited Lisbon for a few days in 1944, he and Eliade saw each other several times. (They had been introduced when Eliade stopped over in Berlin on his return from Bucharest in 1942.) Schmitt was interested in symbolism and had read Eliade's history of religions journal, "Zalmoxis", vol. II, so they found much to discuss. Eliade escorted Schmitt one morning to the Janelas Verdas Museum where they spent more than an hour before Heironymus Bosch's painting, "The Temptation of St. Anthony." Schmitt tells Eliade that there is a great interest currently in Germany in interpreting the symbolism of Bosch, due to the air raids and general insecurity. He points out the bird in the picture (bottom left),

[9] *Jurnal*, I, ed. by Mircea Handoca, Bucureşti: Humanitas, 1993: 13 Originally: *Note din Portugalia*, "Viaţa ilustrată", May 1943.

[10] *Jurnal*, I: 12-16.

[11] Unpublished *Jurnal*.

[12] *Ibid*., 2 May 1943.

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carrying a sealed envelope in its beak, which (he explains) probably represents a sentence of death issued by a secret society of the time[13].

After three years in Portugal, Eliade came to the conclusion that the "Manueline style is only a plastic manifestation of the madness, the delusions of grandeur, the intoxications of power provoked by the maritime discoveries. The men who had conquered continents and discovered new lands simply lost their heads"[14].

Following Nina's death (20 November 1944), and before he was able to leave Portugal for France, Eliade attended a ceremony at the Janelas Verdas Museum for the donation of a Vasco Fernandez painting. Except for a few government officials, the group attending consisted only of artists and historians. "Suddenly," Eliade writes, "I was reminded of my painful degradation. I saw myself, in a flash, back home, among people who believe in art, ideas, books. That is my destiny, that is my vocation"[15]. Probably he is thinking of his old circle of friends, the Criterion group, which consisted largely of "artists" of various sorts: painters, art critics, actors and actresses, playwrights, dramatists and theater directors, musicians, poets, novelists, etc.

Eliade obtained a visa at last, and arrived in Paris on 16 September 1945. He began going to the Louvre immediately: he records visits in the *Journal* for 21 and 25 September and 9 October. Certainly these were not the only dates, because he wrote on 15 June 1978 that in his first months at Paris he spent an hour almost every day at the Louvre. For each visit mentioned in the *Journal*, he names the artists whose works he saw, and often specific paintings. On 1 and 9 February 1945 he went to the Orangerie for a Van Gogh exhibition. He returned to the Louvre on 25 September specifically for a single canvas: Veronese's "Descent from the Cross" and on 9 October for Caravagio's "Death of the Virgin Mary." Other museum visits are recorded for October 1946 and March and October 1948.

Eliade liked to keep "travel diaries," and from them we often read of visits to depositories of art. For instance, on a vacation trip with his wife Christinel in the summer of 1952, he examined the Küntsmuseum in Basel, Switzerland. The museum disappointed him; he had expected a wealth of modern collections, but he finds that he has seen most of the paintings when they were exhibited at Paris. On a positive note, he adds: "Fascinated by Chagall, who is beginning to interest me." After lunch, his host takes him to the Museum of Ethnology, where he discovers an amazing collection of masks from Melanesia and Indonesia[16].

Eliade continued to find some of his greatest hours of inspiration in Italy. Visiting Florence in September 1954, he wrote extensively about what he saw at the Church of St. Mark:

> "Convento di San Marco [. .]. "The Crucifixion" by the Blessed Angelico. At the foot of the Cross – Adam's skull. This motif recurs several times in frescos painted on the walls of the cells. […] Here, the symbolism is even more pronounced: one can see the streams of blood flowing from the Savior's body onto Adam's skull. This motif […] disappears in the great painters of the Renaissance – as might be expected, in fact. The myth of Adam buried at the "enter of the World," on the peak

[13] *Ibid*, 24 May 1944.
[14] *Ibid*, June 1944.
[15] *Ibid*., 15 May 1945.
[16] *Ibid.*, 1 July 1952.

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> of the Cosmic Mountain, where he had been created and where, later, Jesus would be crucified in such a way that, touched by the Savior's blood, the Ancestor will find salvation too – this archaic myth has survived mainly in religious folklore. And if there is an area of Christian experience ignored by the great Renaissance painters, it is precisely this archaic religious folklore which liturgical poetry and iconography had validated ten or twelve centuries earlier"[17].

Eliade comments also on Fra Angelico's "Last Judgment." He observes that all the redeemed have the same, childlike faces. He wonders if every Christian understands the symbolism. "To resemble a child means to be newborn, that is, born again, to another life, a spiritual one; to be, therefore, an initiate". Such a one, Eliade points out, exists outside of time, he is not subject to the law of becoming; he is a *puer aeternus*, an eternal child. "All these things Fra Angelico says infinitely better, and with a dazzling simplicity, in 'The Last Judgment,'" Eliade observes.

Another wonder, for him, at the Florence convent, was found in the cells of the Dominican monks. In both "The Transfiguration" and "The Two Marys at the Tomb," Christ is represented as "an immense, dazzling Cosmic Egg." Eliade stands amazed at the painter's intuition "that the light of the Transfiguration, which blinded the Apostles on Mt. Tabor, is the same glorious light of the Cosmos on the eve of Creation, when the world was still 'germinal,' not yet detached from God."

Three years later, Eliade (with his wife) was again in Venice, the city so rich in art, where he had first visited in his youth. Inevitably, he found himself projected backward in memory to 1927. When his student group arrived in the city, he recalled, the first place they headed was the Piazza San Marco, with its basilica. But while the others were following the lecture of the guide, Eliade slipped off alone. Suddenly he came upon the mosaic, Christos Angelos – a very tall Jesus depicted as a beautiful, beardless youth. Without really understanding, Eliade says, he had a *presentiment* that this was an image of the androgyne. Now, thirty years later, he gazes upon the figure with the "same, unaccountable attraction."[18]

On this 1957 trip also, at Torcello, he discovered an astonishing painting in a basilica: God is portrayed in the form of a Grandfather, "with Jesus on his knee and several other children holding to the hem of his garment." These children are we, humankind, Eliade explains, not the direct creation of God, but his *grandchildren*. "Such a vision can only be the creation of the folk genius, and it makes sense only when integrated into the universe of folklore"[19].

Five years later, he and Christinel were in Venice once more, and this time Eliade recalled his "retrospective" visit of 1937 to see the Tinteretto exhibit[20]. "I had just then begun to admire that giant, unjustly demeaned by art critics fascinated by Florence and Rome," he remembers. This time he goes to San Rocco also for viewing the Tinterettos.

In September 1967 the Eliades were hosted by friends at Venice for a music and dance festival at La Fenice. In addition to attending the programed events, Eliade saw

[17] *Ibid*., September 1954.
[18] *Ibid.*, August 1957.
[19] *Ibid.* Eliade does not identify either the artist or the church.
[20] *Ibid.*, 21 August 1962. Eliade recalls the date as 1936, and he fails to mention that Nina was with him.

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two contemporary art exhibits and revisited the church of San Marco at least twice during the three weeks they were there[21].

The last major visit to Italy that entailed an "artistic event" occurred in September 1985, less than a year prior to his death. Traveling in a part of Italy he had never visited, he wanted to see the paintings in the Cathedral of Santa Euphemia at Orvieto. The structure itself (as the diarist notes) is a marvel, being a harmonious union of a Romanesque body with a pre-Baroque façade. After being deeply impressed by the dome as seen in the twilight, Eliade and his host entered the cathedral. "Near the altar, on the right, an amazing chamber of paintings by Luca Signorelli [...]. Finally, at age seventy-eight, I've succeeded in seeing the *original* of these famous frescos of Signorelli!" he exclaims[22].

When he traveled in Europe, especially by car (courtesy of a friend or relative: he himself did not drive), he would, apparently, insist on stopping at every notable cathedral or church, especially if he knew that paintings could be seen there. On a journey through Burgundy in August 1963 in the auto of Sibylle, Christinel's sister, Eliade notes stops at Sens, Auxerre ("a surprising Christ Cosmocrator; also a very beautiful Christ on a donkey"), Avalon, and Beaune. At this last town, in the Hôtel-Dieu (a hospice from 1450 till 1975), he looks upon the "splendid" altar piece depicting the Last Judgment, by Van der Weyden (1400-1464), and the church on l'Impasse Notre-Dame, several paintings on which he comments: in particular, the one of the Visit of the Magi in which the baby Jesus is frightened by the Negro King (based on a popular legend). Then, on to to the cathedral at Autun (Jesus Commissioning his Disciples), etc.; and finally, the vandalized monastery at Cluny.

Finding himself at Bruges, in Flanders, in 1974, he took advantage of the opportunity to see the Memling Museum[23], the Museum of Beaux Arts, and the Van Gogh Museum – all outstanding depositories of classical works of art.

From what has been said thus far, it would seem that, apart from Indian sacred art, what Eliade personally liked – indeed, *loved* – was the classical, Christian art of the "masters." Clearly, his favorite places to look for works of art (paintings, primarily) were the cathedrals and museums of Europe. Moreover, he preferred the older works – from the Renaissance period, the "golden age," or even prior to it. Concerning these, he considered himself something of a connoisseur, capable of evaluating and critiquing them. But Eliade's artistic interests and tastes, while focused here, extended much more widely.

When he was in Oslo in 1970 attending an International Association for the History of Religions congress, he could only "view hurriedly" the paintings at the cathedral, but he visited in a more leisurely manner the Edvard Munch Museum. He was deeply impressed by the painter's obsession with death. "I ought to return here," he says, "especially to go more deeply into those immense cosmogonic, mythological, and eschatological canvasses [...]"[24]. Next he was taken by his Oslo hosts to the Frogner Park, which is filled with bizarre statuary created over the course of forty years by Gustav Vigeland (1869-1943). "The farther you proceed into the park, the more the

[21] *Ibid.*, 1-21 September 1967.
[22] *Journal*, Orvieto, 28 September 1985. Signorelli. 1441-1521.
[23] Hans Memling or Memline, 1439-1494, Flemish painter.
[24] *Journal*, 23 August 1970. Munch's dates: 1863-1944.

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imagination and courage of this sculptor enchant you," he writes in his journal. Eliade saw the 58 groups in bronze, representing different phases of human life, nine bronzes portraying the process of growth from fetus to early childhood, a fountain with sixty bas-reliefs and twenty groups surrounding the central basin representing the entire life cycle, and a monolithic granite pillar, seventeen meters high, with 121 human bodies intertwined like snakes, struggling to climb up to the light. Overwhelmed, Eliade finds himself unable to comment, and says he must procure an album of the park, so as to be able to study it at his leisure[25].

On at least two occasions, as he records in his *Journal*, Eliade spent extensive periods of time at exhibitions of Impressionists. In Paris, in 1972, he went for a full afternoon to the Orangerie to see a special exhibit of this style of art, and recorded that he returned home "invigorated, almost cheerful." Then he adds: "As long as such joys are permitted us, we have no right to despair"[26].

In Philadelphia in May 1974 for a special lecture, he was taken by his host to the Barnes Foundation, a private museum, located a few miles north of the city. There, a unique collection of Impressionists' works had been assembled by a wealthy manufacturer earlier in the century. Eliade found himself surrounded by some three hundred canvasses by Renoir, seventy by Matisse, and innumerable others by Manet, Degas, Seurat, Picasso, etc. "No use trying to describe the *overwhelming* impression left on me by hundreds of canvasses by the *same artist*. [...] Impossible to understand this emotion – which was not simply aesthetic – of the *mass*, of the *complete œuvre* (in Renoir's case, I believe 60-65 % of his whole production)." Eliade laments his inability to devote the time necessary to inform himself better on French Impressionism and modern artists in general[27].

In 1963 Eliade met the painter, Marc Chagall, when the two of them were paired as speakers at a conference held in Washington, D.C. Chagall's remarks as well as Eliade's response have been published, and both make interesting reading[28]. Chagall says that for the past hundred years or so, the world has become increasingly broken, due to doubt, and that this fact has been reflected in art styles. He confesses that he himself, earlier, presented a fragmented art, but now he wants to build something positive, creating works inspired by biblical themes and based on "Love." In his response, Eliade stresses what he sees as a consistently positive feature of Chagall's art, even in his early works: his refusal to transform Nature into abstract forms. Eliade is convinced that the artist has rediscovered the mystery and holiness of Nature, that in his art Nature is transfigured by the nostalgia for Paradise (equivalent to the memory of the world of childhood, ordinarily lost when one reaches maturity). The revelations of childhood in Chagall's art are of a religious order, Eliade insists, whether or not the artist knows it. Thus, his art has "recovered the holiness that is in the world and in human life," and he has "rediscovered happiness."

[25] *Ibid*, 23 August 1970.

[26] *Journal*, 10 September 1972. He had been depressed over recent news from home.

[27] *Journal*, 25-26 May 1974.

[28] "Beauty and Faith," in John U. Nef, ed., *Bridges of Human Understanding*, New York University Publishers, 1964: 112-123. Reprinted in *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Modern Artist*, ed. by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, New York: Continuum, 1992: 98-92.

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After the conference was over, according to Eliade, Chagall congratulated him and gave him a hug. "He confesses [...] that he had been a little 'afraid' of what I would say. ("I'm afraid of savants,' he adds)"[29].

Even before the Eliades moved to the United States (1956-57), Christinel's sister, Lisette, and her husband, the orchestra conductor Ionel Perlea, already were making their home in New York City. When the Eliades settled in Chicago, it was their custom to return for the summers to Europe. Almost every spring and fall, when passing through New York, they would stop over in with the Perleas for a few days. Frequently, they spent the Christmas-New Years' holidays there as well. It became Mircea's custom to spend time at the Metropolitan Museum or the Museum of Modern Art, alone or with Christinel, each time they were there, if possible. The *Journal* lists visits for 30 June 1961, 13 October 1961, 28 April 1964, 31 December 1964 , 1 January 1965 (Museum of Modern Art), 13 October 1970, 11 June 1975, 15 and 16 June 1978 (all afternoon on the 15th, all day on the 16th). By no means were these the only such visits he made to these halls, since he wrote on 20 August 1973: "Distressed that the Metropolitan Museum is closed. It's become almost a ritual for us to visit it each time we come to New York"[30]. Specific exhibits or sections of the museum listed as having been visited are the Chinese, Egyptian, Beckman Exhibit (Expressionists and Impressionists), Ancient Near East, Etruria, and Greece, and at the Museum of Modern Art: Chagall, Picasso, and "Pop Art." When he went to the Metropolitan, he often spoke of the pleasure of seeing familiar works again.

An American might be tempted to underrate the importance of this seeming passion of a cultured Romanian for great art as merely a concomitant of his European culture[31]. I believe, however, that it was much more than this. For Mircea Eliade, viewing and contemplating such art constituted a means of "liberating the imagination." On 19 July 1974, after having just visited the Memling Museum in Bruges, he wrote:

> "[. ..] The contemplation of works of art liberates the powers of the imagination which lie in each of us, chained and oppressed. The same thing happens with certain "discoveries" – more precisely, revelations – in music, poetry, or visiting for the first time certain "natural monuments." In all cases, the "change of decor" is equivalent to the discovery of a "new world" – the revelation of the dialectics of the creative imagination".

That is, *all* art is capable of releasing man's powers of creation.

Eliade wrote a number of articles over the course of his life that deal with the meaning and value of works of art (of all kinds). These were collected and published in English in a volume edited by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona in 1992[32]. Several articles from the collection have been cited already in this paper. The article in which Eliade speaks most directly about the role of art in the modern world – and, by extension, perhaps, in his own life – is *The Sacred and the Modern Artist*, first published in 1964.

[29] Cf. *Journal*, 4 May 1963.

[30] These visits were mentioned also by Sanda Loga in "Vatra", 6/7, Summer 2001: 108.

[31] Cf., for example, the references in Virgil Ierunca's journal to his frequent visits to art museums in Paris (*Au-trecut anii...*, *Fragmente de jurnal*, Bucureşti: Humanitas, 2000. His inclinations, however, tended toward modern art.

[32] Cited above.

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Starting from Nietzche's 1880 declaration of the "death of God," Eliade states that for "modern man" (the educated populace of the Western world) it has become impossible to express a religious experience in traditional religious language. "Thus, for more than a century, the West has not been creating a 'religious art' in the traditional sense of the term. Artists are no longer interested in traditional religious these and symbols.

Nevertheless, Eliade insists, this doesn't mean that the sacred has disappeared from modern art, but only that it has been "camouflaged," has become "unrecognizable," under apparently "profane forms." True, there are a few modern artists (Rouault, Chagall) who paint from an explicitly religious viewpoint, but "the great majority of artists do not seem to have 'faith' in the traditional sense of the word. They are not consciously 'religious.' Nonetheless, we maintain that the sacred, although unrecognizable, is present in their works." Like "modern man" in general, the modern artist has "forgotten" religion, "but the sacred survives, buried in his unconscious." And if this is true of modern man in general, it is even truer of the artist, because in his work, perhaps without his knowing it, he "penetrates – at times dangerously – into the depths of his own psyche." In cubism and tachism Eliade sees the artist engaged in a "desperate effort" to penetrate matter and expose it. Two characteristics of modern art, the destruction of traditional forms and the fascination with the elementary forms of matter, are comparable to "cosmic religiosity," Eliade thinks. The "destruction of traditional worlds" attempted by artists resembles the concept of cosmic cycles which require periodic universal destructions in order for the cosmos to be renewed. The penetration into the essence of matter is like the sacredness attributed, prior to Judeo-Christianity, to Natural objects, according to Eliade. He finds (optimistically!) in these developments the signs of a possible new philosophical and religious orientation.

Where does all this leave us? What did art *mean* for Eliade personally? Can we draw any conclusions about Eliade's religious experience from his undeniable passion for viewing paintings, especially works of religious art of the old masters? Are we seeking to intrude upon his privacy by asking these questions? In the famous 1978 series of interviews with C.-H. Rocquet, he said emphatically: "I made the decision long ago to maintain a kind of discreet silence as to what I personally believe or don't believe"[33]. Emil Cioran, a man with whom Eliade spent a great deal of his time when he lived in Paris, once wrote: "We are all of us, and Eliade to the fore, would-have-been believers; we are all religious minds without religion"[34]. Was Cioran right? Was he a "modern man" without traditional religious sensibilities, for whom art was a substitute? Was Eliade's enjoyment of art only aesthetic, that is "profane," or was it "a manifestation of the religious spirit," as Sanda Nițescu testified in the statement quoted at the head of this article?

I have provided the illustrations. It remains for the reader to draw his or her own conclusions.

[33] Cf. *Ordeal by Labyrinth*, *Conversations with Claude-Henri Rocquet*. Trans. from the French by Derek Coltman, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982: 132. French: *L'Épreuve du Labyrinthe*, Paris, Pierre Belfond, 1978.

[34] "The Beginnings of a Friendship," in *Myths and Symbols: Studies in Honor of Mircea Eliade*, ed. by Joseph M. Kitagawa and Charles H. Long, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969: 414. Also in *Mircea Eliade.* Cahiers l'Herne, 33, Paris: Editions de l'Herne, 1978: 263.

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La passion de Mircea Eliade pour l'art

Cette étude a comme point de départ la constatation faite par Sanda Nițescu selon laquelle „l'art et les artistes intéressaient beaucoup [Eliade], comme une autre manifestation de l'esprit religieux, et pas seulement comme simple phénomène esthétique". Eliade a consacré une grande partie de son temps à la visite des musées, des expositions et des cathédrales, mais il avait aussi un penchant pour la musique (notamment pour la musique classique), le théâtre, le ballet, l'architecture, l'art populaire et, bien sur, pour la littérature.

Dans l'opinion d'Eliade, à l'origine, l'art était sacré, en représentant une forme de manifestation de la divinité dans le monde.

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