

My understanding of the role of art and the artist in a contemporary western society.

Bill Moyers:

“Who interprets the divinity inherent in nature for us today? Who are our shamans? Who interprets unseen things for us?”

Joseph Campbell:

It is the function of the artist to do this. The artist is the one who communicates myth for today.

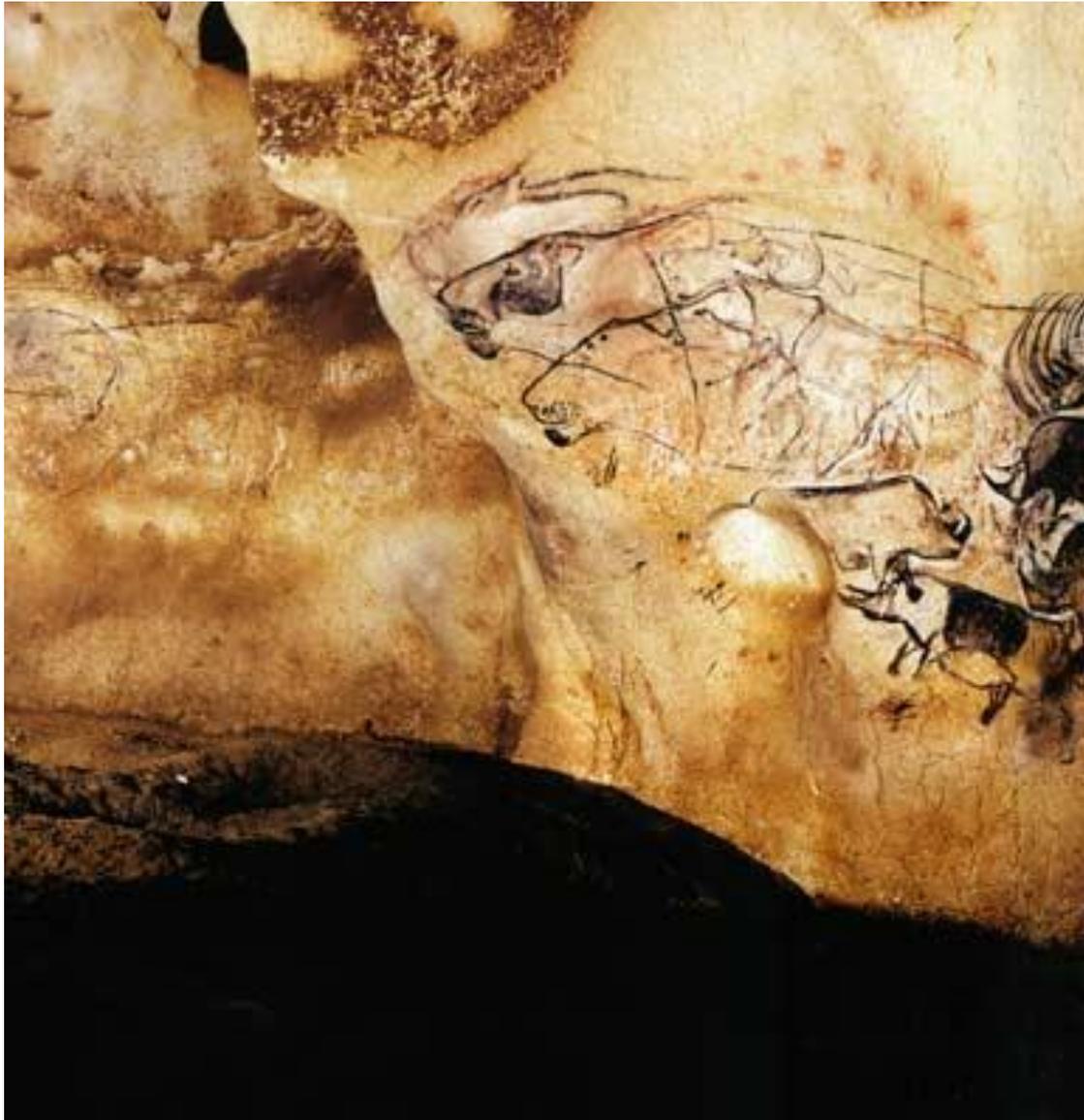
The Power of Myth, Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, Doubleday Publishers, New York, U.S.A., 1988, page 99

Beginning from the prehistoric time and throughout the centuries the role of the artist has always been a very important one. The artist was the visionary and the magician who could materialize the unseen. In the past through the artwork the artist has managed to break down all barriers and influence people's consciences on quite a deep emotional and spiritual level. The way of living however, has changed dramatically over the last 100 years through many technological inventions such as photography, television, photocopier, computers and digital media ect. In this day and age we are constantly bombarded by media in different shapes and forms. We live in a consumerist's society and our minds are overloaded by images and objects trying to influence us everyday. The power of an image is not as strong as it used to be. But has art lost its power to influence our conciseness completely? What is the role of art and the artist in today's society?

In my essay I am going to look at the history of art and how it started and what was the purpose of its beginning. I am also going to explore the importance of symbolism in art. Finally I am going to analyse the importance of art and its purpose and the role of the artist in human society through exploring various artists and artistic movements of 20th century and the contemporary art.

We do not know how art begun and what was its purpose. We can only guess through archaeological founds and preserved cave paintings. In order to understand how the first art came about we need to understand the world our ancestors lived in. Lacking the scientific knowledge and technology of present time, the early people responded to the natural world at an intuitive level. They may have believed that consciousness was shared by all things, animate and inanimate alike and this consciousness could be addresses through symbols.

Palaeolithic people were nomadic gatherers whose need for food and clothing were largely dependant on hunting the wild animals such as deer, mammoths and horses.



1) Illustration - Large lions and dots, Sorcerer's Chamber, Chauvet Cave, France 35,000 B.C.

They were attracted to the openings of the caves to pitch their tents, but archaeological evidence suggests that they did not live in the interior of the caves. as they were wet and unstable. Many of the most significant and most beautiful cave paintings however can be found in the deep, dark labyrinth of the caves.

That may suggest that the early art was not meant to be viewed and its function was not merely decorative. It is therefore possible that the cave paintings were of profound symbolic significance to our ancestors and the cave itself was a sacred place of initiation, representing the womb of the earth or the home of the spirits who ruled imagination.



2) Illustration - Running horse, Lascaux Cave, France

Scholar Abbé Henri Breuil refers to the prehistoric cave and mural art of Western Europe as follows:

“Animals are represented pierced with symbolical arrows (bison and ibexes at Niaux, horses at Lascaux), clay models are riddled with spent marks (at Montespan, a headless lion and bear, which seem to have received new skins at various times): facts which evoke the idea of sympathetic magic. The numerous pregnant women and men closely pursuing their women suggest the idea of fertility magic. The deliberate alteration of the essential features of certain animals seems to indicate taboos. Human figures dressed up in an animal or grotesque masks evoke the dancing and an initiation ceremony of living people or represents the sorcerers or gods of the Upper Palaeolithic.”¹

From what Breuil says we could estimate that the likely explanation of these paintings is the belief of our ancestors in magic or the power of mind which is instrumented by a certain ritual and reinforced by a visual image. Of course, this is only an estimate, but it is pretty well supported by the use of art of primitive people of our own age such as the Aborigines in Australia, some tribes in Africa and South America or the art of Native American Indians.

¹ John Robinson, Chauvet Cave, [http:// www.bradshawfoundation.com/](http://www.bradshawfoundation.com/)

But who were the artists of prehistory times? Our ancestors lived in a hunter's gathering society where it is the shaman who performs the magic and generally looks after the spiritual and physical wellbeing of his tribe. It is therefore very likely that the shamans or sorcerers were the very first artists² who created works of art in order to reinforce their magic rituals. We could say that the role of the artist/shaman's art was to symbolically materialise unseen things and wishes such as rain, fertility of women, healing of the ill, plenty of animals, successful hunt which were vital for the survival of the tribe. It was here when man first used the power of art to express something as abstract as a thought or a wish.



3) Illustration – *The Mooroop Bindar and the Mallees (The spirit kangaroo and The Mallees)*, C. Dan Purche of Nairua tribe, contemporary aboriginal painting,

Throughout the ages art has become a very important aspect of human culture. It has developed according to different nations, their beliefs and the surroundings people lived in. Through changes in the society (the transition from hunter's society to agricultural one) the beliefs of people has changed and so has the role of the artist. The role of the artist/shaman as a spiritual leader and the performer of magic have changed and become separated into two different roles. It separated into the role of a priest/ess as a religious leader and the role of artist who carried on expressing emotions, feelings and their observation of the world visually. Although separated, the close connection between the visual and the spiritual remained. Many artworks from the prehistory throughout the roman times, medieval times, renaissance, romanticism and others represent religious or spiritual motifs. The use of symbolism in these artworks played a very important part.

² Nevill Drury, *Shamanism*, page 9, Element Books limited, UK, 1996

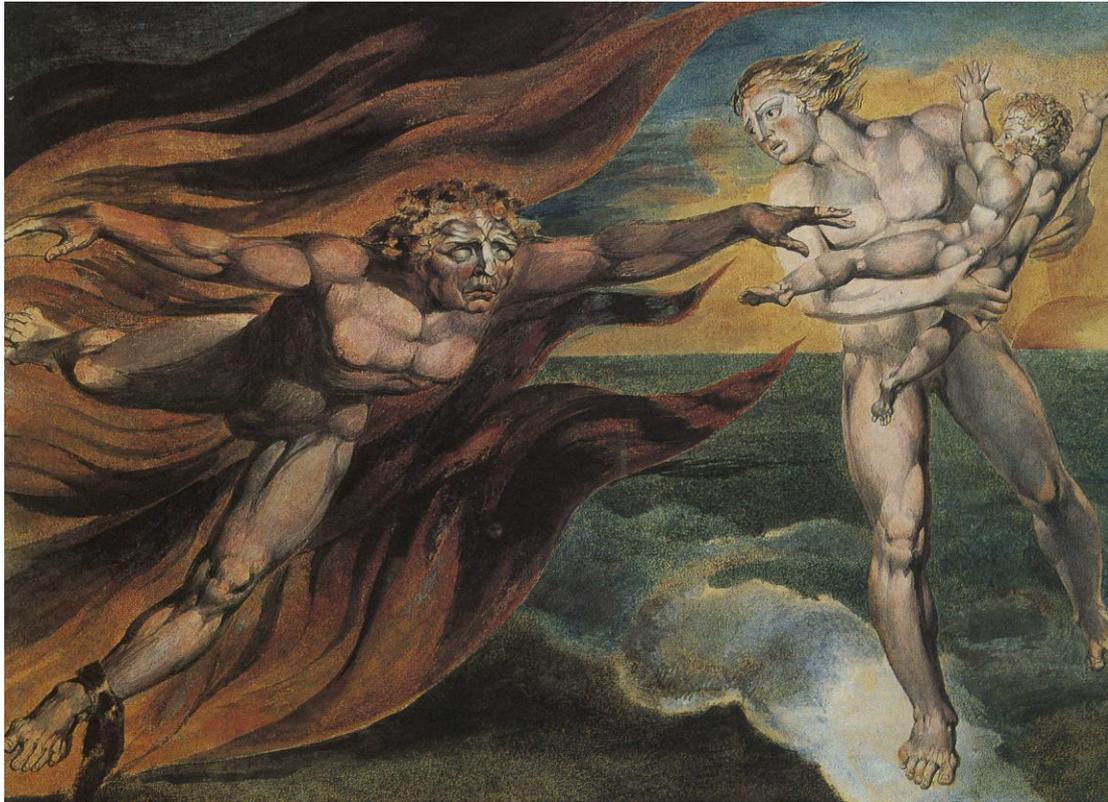


4) *Illustration – The Annunciation, Simone & Lippo Memmi, 1333, part of an altarpiece made for Siena Cathedral, Uffizi, Florence, tempera on wood*
The painting represents the moment when Archangel Gabriel arrives from heaven to greet the virgin in his hand he holds olive branch, the symbol of peace, between the two stands a vase with white lilies, symbol of virginity, and high up we can see the dove the symbol of Holy Ghost.



5) Illustration – Cecilia Gallerani (*Lady with the Hermin*), Leonardo da Vinci, 1490, oil on canvas

The hermin is a symbol of chastity. Its white winter coat was linked with purity. There is a legend that the animal would die if its coat was sullied.



6) Illustration – *The Good and Evil Angels*, William Blake, 1795.
The angels seem to struggle for possession of a child, a symbol of lost innocence.

Symbols predate writing as a way of communicating large ideas. The artists and craftsmen have used these symbols to express their and the society ideas about the natural world around them and also their religious and spiritual beliefs. Through the use of symbols art become a powerful tool for emperors and spiritual leaders to communicate with, influence or even manipulate masses of people³. The use and meanings of symbols varied from different cultures. Some symbols based on the primary ideas about the world such as the anima & animus, good & evil, dark & light, day & night however have reoccurred in various different societies ranging from primitive cultures to developed civilizations of Asia, Middle east, India, Europe and Central America.

³ How art changed the world, BBC 1, 2005

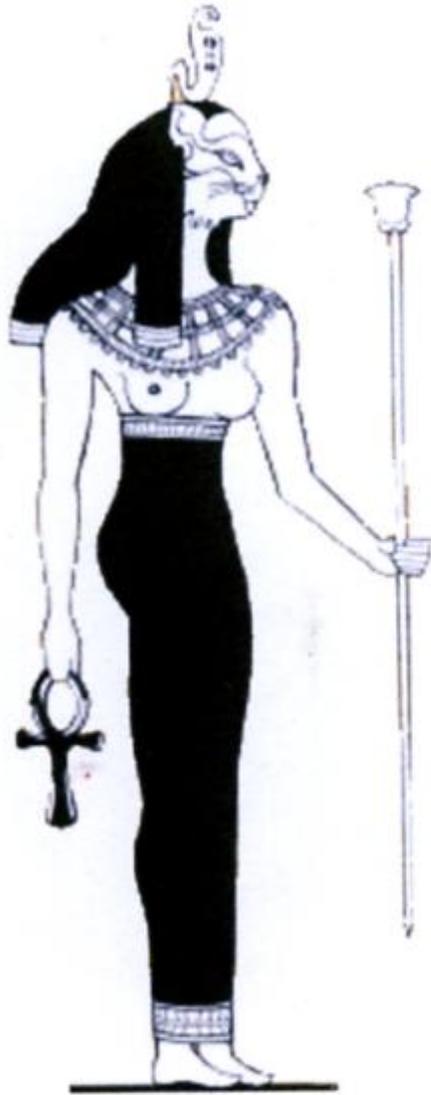


7) *Illustration – Wala-Undayna (lightening man), Australian Aboriginal bark painting from Western Arnhem Land*

The fertility symbolism of lightning in this painting represents a cosmic erect penis (phallic motif blended in the pattern). The lightning as a phallic symbol also appear in one Greek myth where Dionysus's mother was impregnated by lightning flash of Zeus.

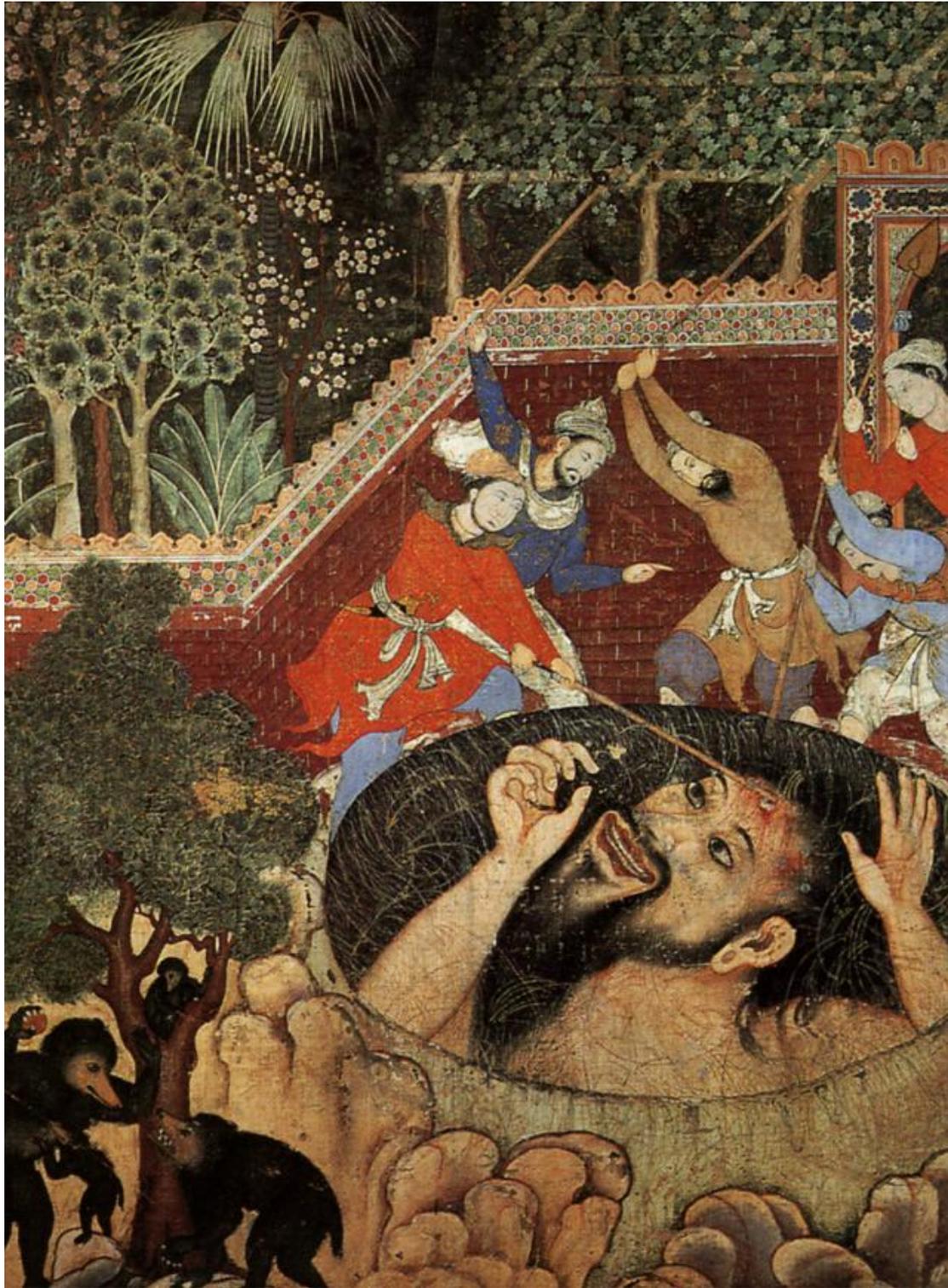


8) Illustration - Ma-Ku creating an orchard from the sea, Hsiang Kun, 2c.AD
 In Chinese mythology Ma-Ku was a beneficent sorceress in all people. In her first avatar, she reclaimed large tract of land from the sea and planted it with mulberry trees. In another incarnation Ma-Ku tricked her cruel father into giving his slaves more rest. Her father became violently angry and Ma-Ku fled to become hermit. Her father was overcome with grief and went blind through weeping. Ma-Ku returned to comfort her father and bathe his eyes with curative potion.



9) *Illustration – Bast – Cat Goddess of Egypt*

The cat as a symbol is spread worldwide. They represent transformation, clairvoyance, agility, watchfulness, sensual beauty, mystery, femininity and female malice. In Egypt, they worshipped the feline-headed goddess Bast and cats were sacred creatures. The Bast was linked with pleasure, fertility and protection.



10) Illustration – Zammurad, Mughal miniature, 1570

This Indian painting represents the giant Zammurad who is forced to remain in the well. It represents 'The Shadow' - the dark side of our psyche. The Shadow is an expression of our antisocial desires of which we are ashamed of and attempt to bury them in the unconscious. It is the inner terror of what we might do if we ever lose control over it. At its worst the shadow is responsible for the cruelties that people caused each other. In the western world The Shadow is represented by the devil.



11) Illustration – *The Birth of Venus, Sandro Botticelli, 1480*

In Botticelli's painting the scallop shell represents the vulva. The symbol of vulva appears in many cultures it often represents the female principle: mother figure and the death-rebirth cycle. The female symbolism is often connected with rivers, lakes, springs, sea and the lunar cycle.

From the reappearance of these fundamental symbols in different cultures across the globe we could assume that there is some kind of universal language to whom which people understand and respond instinctively. The pioneer of psychotherapy Swiss psychotherapist Carl Jung⁴ noticed this reappearance of symbols in different cultures and it made him believe that some primary symbols – archetypes (as he called them) are deeply embedded in the human psyche and that we respond to them instinctively. In analysing the dreams of diverse patients Jung also noticed that reoccurrence of certain deeply symbolic images. He discovered the likeness between the images that come out during the analyses of the patients and the symbols appearing in Eastern and Western religions, myths, legends and rituals. Out of his discovery

Jung concluded that not only that some symbols are of universal significance, but also that symbolism plays an important part in the psychic processes that influence every aspect of human thought and endeavour.⁵

He also believed that all people share the same subconscious mind – the Collective Unconscious⁶ which contains all of the collective experience and wisdom of every human being who has ever lived on the planet Earth.

⁴ David Fontana, *The secret language of symbols*, page 11, Pavilion Books Limited, London, UK, 1193

⁵ Jack Tresidder, *Symbols and their meanings*, page 6, Duncan Baird Publishers, London, UK, 2000

⁶ Francis X. King, *The Encyclopaedia of Mind, Magic & Mysteries*, page 48, Dorling Kindersley Ltd, London, UK, 1991

He stated that this subconscious mind is revealed through dreams. Carl Jung however wasn't the first person saying that the symbols in our dreams have got a hidden meaning. The idea that dreams are meaningful and are capable of interpretation is a very old one. Stories about the symbolic and prophetic dreams which can be found in the Egyptian papyri and the Old Testament and other cultures confirm the importance of symbols present in our dreams and their influence on our conscious mind.

20th century's art movements saw a great interest in the notion of symbolism and spirituality in art. Perhaps some of the main reasons for that was the increasing political instability in Europe and then the events of the First and Second World Wars which has made the modernist artists to question the Humanist beliefs in reason, technical advancement and scientific progress.⁷ The horrors of the two wars had made the artists who looked into the future with belief in technical progress feeling confused and disillusioned as it was the very scientific progress that enabled people to kill in masses. This realisation has made many artists retreat inwards and seek for 'the truth'⁸ from within rather than from the outside world or the dogmatic Church and its God.



12) Illustration – Dance, Henri Matisse, 1912

In this painting Matisse chose the round dance as a symbol to express the rhythm of the 20th century. For Matisse and other Fauvists the use of colour was very important. They believed that art should evoke emotional sensation through form and colour.

⁷ Professor Christopher L. C. E. Witcombe, The Roots of Modernism, first part of five part essay on Modernism, page 1-3, www.arthistory.sbs.edu/artartists/modpostmod.html

⁸ Professor Christopher L. C. E. Witcombe, The Roots of Modernism, first part of five part essay on Modernism, page 4, www.arthistory.sbs.edu/artartists/modpoatmod.html

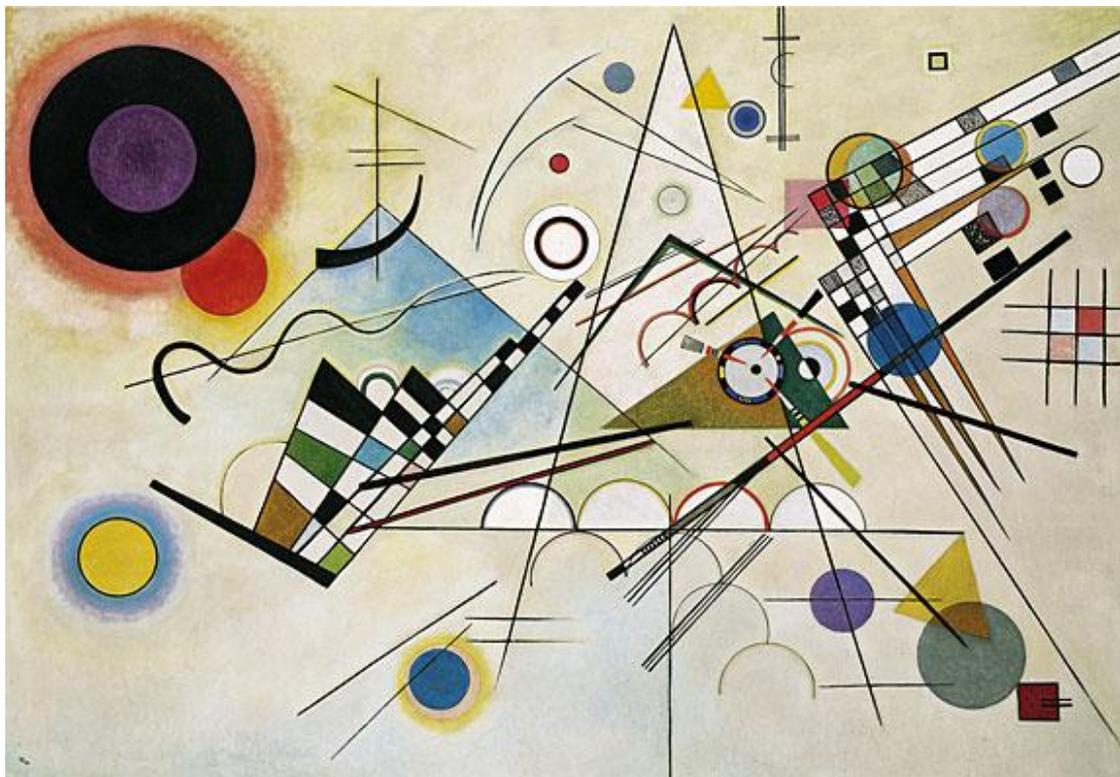


13) Illustration – Candelabrum, Mexico

This decorated pottery takes the form of a Tree of Life with devils and other figures in regional costume displaying bread and fruit at their feet. The symbol of a tree as a symbol of cosmic order is widely spread across the continents

Upon this time, artistic movements such as Primitivism, Fauvism (Picasso, Matisse) Der Blaue Reiter (Vasily Kandinsky, Franz Marc), Surrealism (Max Ernst, Frida Kahlo, Abstract Expressionism (Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko) sprung up. Although stylistically quite different all these movements have got few things in common. They all believed in the role of artist as a visionary. They saw the artist as an isolated figure, alienated from the main street society who is morally urged to create a new type of art which might influence and confront the irrational, violent and absurd world. They were inspired by the symbolic simplicity of primitive art and the complexity of the shamanic beliefs. They were also interested in psychoanalysis, colour and dream symbolism and occult philosophies. In the following paragraphs I would like to look closer at 3 of these artistic movements, which had in my opinion a great influence on the art of the rest of 20th century and the contemporary art of the present times

In his book *On the Spiritual in Art*, Vasily Kandinsky talks about the idea of art as a sort of spiritual autobiography, through which viewers get in touch with their own spirituality. He also saw himself as a shaman and his art as a metaphor for '*cultural healing and regeneration*'⁹. He believed that just as shaman healed his clan, the artist would heal its society. Kandinsky and his essays on the spirituality and art had influence on another artistic movement – Surrealism.



14) *Illustration – Composition 8, Vasily Kandinsky, 1923*

Originally trained in Ethnography Kandinsky was deeply influenced by shamanism in his art. He embraced the simplicity in primitive art and declared his belief in the symbolic and psychological power of colours and abstract symbols.

⁹ Primitivism and Shamanism in Russian Modern Art, Meredith Tanguay, page 13, <http://people.colgate.edu/mtanguay/primitivism.htm>

The Surrealists' art and beliefs were also deeply influenced by the Jungian and Freudian theories on the subconscious mind and dream symbols:

*'Pure psychic Automatism, by which it is intended to express, verbally, in writing, or by other means, the real process of thought. Thought's dictation, the absence of all control exercised by the reason and outside all aesthetic or moral reason'*¹⁰.

The surrealist aims were a total transformation of the way people think by breaking down the barriers between their inner and outer worlds. They wanted people to change the way they perceived the reality and believed that their art would liberate the unconscious, reunite it with the conscious and free mankind from the binds of logic and reason which so far led only to war and domination.



15) Illustration – *Henry Ford Hospital*, Frida Kahlo, 1932

On 4 July 1932 Frida Kahlo suffered a miscarriage in Detroit. The small vulnerable figure of the artist lying in enormous bed creates an impression of loneliness and helplessness – a reflection of her feelings after the loss of her baby. The impression is reinforced by the empty and desolate industrial landscape on the horizon. The bed is surrounded by various images connected to her representing the reasons surrounding the miscarriage.

¹⁰ Andre Breton, *Manifesto of Surrealism*, 1924, *Dada and Surrealism: Text and Extracts*, page 5, <http://pers-www.wlv.ac.uk/~fa1871/srrext.html>



16) *Illustration – Forest and Dove, Max Ernst, 1927*

Forrest appear frequently appear in Ernst's work and recall his feeling of enchantment and terror of the woods near his childhood home. Forests are a powerful symbol of dark, dangerous yet mysterious and magic place in German tradition. In this work, a small dove, which Ernst liked to use as a symbol of represent himself, is trapped amongst the threatening trees.

In my opinion, the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo was the most successful in this ambition, if unintentionally. Although she has never considered herself to be the part of the Surrealist movement her deeply symbolic work is reminiscent of the ones the Surrealists made. She famously stated:

*'They thought I was a Surrealist but I wasn't. I never painted dreams I painted my own reality.'*¹¹

But she didn't paint the reality as she saw it but as she felt it. She employed various symbols from her everyday surroundings to express her feeling. She was also using the symbols from the mythology of the Native American Indians of Central America. I believe that by painting the reality as she felt it Frida Kahlo somehow did manage to succeed in the Surrealist ambition in breaking down the barrier between the inner and outer worlds. She painted her inner world/her own reality using the images and symbols from the outer world.



17) Illustration - *Enchanted Wood*, Jackson Pollock, 1957

Pollock used his 'dripping method' to create harmonious and rhythmical paintings. He described his paintings as 'energy and motion made visible'

The Surrealists concept of '*psychic automatism*' of extracting images and creativity out of the unconscious mind and the Jungian theory about the 'collective unconscious' has inspired another artistic movement – Abstract Expressionisms. The artists of this movement believed that the true subject for art was the man's emotions and on the basis of psychic automatism they invented new methods how to express it: Action Painting (Jackson Pollock) and Colour-Field Painting (Mark Rothko). They believed that if they apply paint on the canvas or combine certain colour fields together without thinking (automatically) they will not only discover things about themselves but also reveal the symbols and universal language of the collective subconscious.

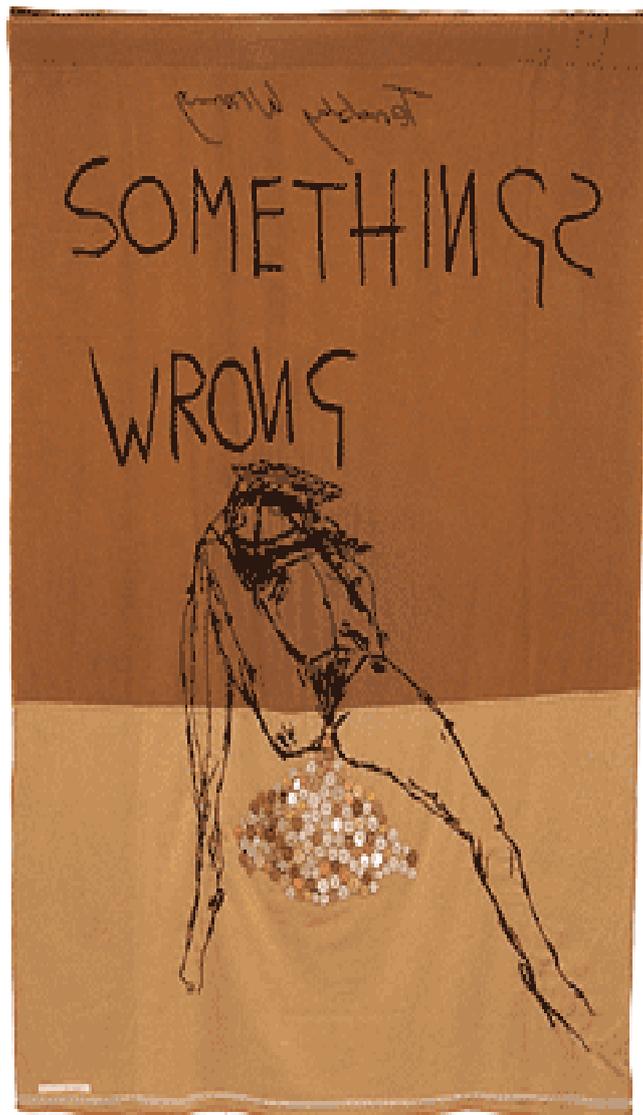
¹¹ Frida Kahlo, Kahlo, Andrea Kettenmann, Taschen GbH, Koln, 2002, page 48



*18)Illustration – White, Pink and Mustard, mark Rothko, 1954
In his colour-field paintings Rothko used the colour symbolism to create meditative
and emotional atmosphere*

The Abstract Expressionists also believed that the role of art and the artist in the society was not only important but essential. Abstract Expressionism however was one of last major artistic movement of the 20th century which has maintained the belief if the artist as a visionary and the art as a tool to change or transform people's way of thinking.

After the 2nd World War a new artistic movement which has changed the face of art for ever was formed – Pop Art. In the new philosophy of Pop Art there was no more idealism, gone was the glorification of the nature and human spirit. The main focus was the reality of the upcoming consumer society. The new artistic techniques, reflecting the consumerist society, have become copying and mass reproduction of images from the popular culture.



19) Illustration – *Something's Wrong*, Tracy Emin, 2002
Tracy Emin bares herself completely in her work. Through her highly autobiographical work she explored very openly and graphically the issues around alcoholism, sex, rape and promiscuity ect.



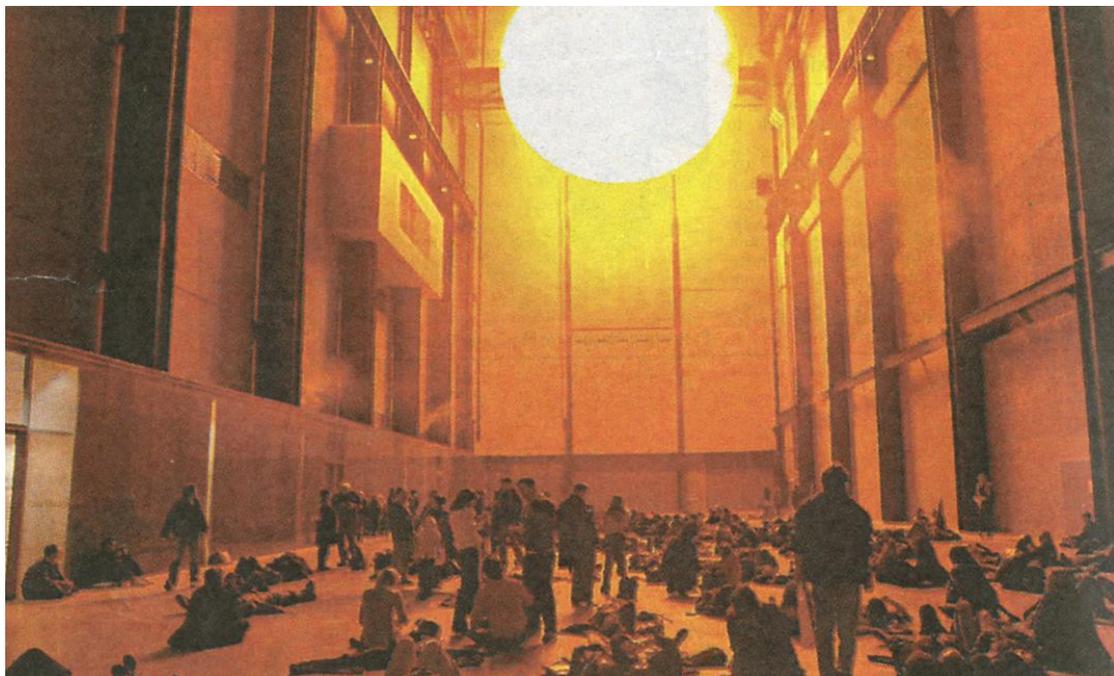
20) *Illustration – Adam and Eve (detail, Damian Hirst, 2003*

In his work Hirst frequently uses organic materials such as blood or the dead bodies of animals to creating gruesome and disturbing installations. He explores the idea of life and death through disturbing metaphors in which he is critical of the contemporary society.

In his book *At the End of Art*, Arthur Danto claims that one of the key artist Andy Warhol made it no longer possible to distinguish something that is art from something that is not¹².

We could say that it was here for the first time in the history when art lost its purpose which up to this point was always clearly defined. Pop Art was the catalyst for moving away from the modernist ideals about art and the artist and a new way of thinking has been born. – Postmodernism.

Postmodernism and its new way of perception take us to the present contemporary art. Postmodernist way of thinking is open and unbound. There is no ideals, no expectations, not taboos, no boundaries, no philosophies about art and its purpose. Postmodernism praises the individualism - there are no more artistic avangarde movements with different manifestos and philosophies. The artist's aim is no longer to create a new type of art which would change people's perception on world. Nevertheless, art is still being created and whether it has any meaning it doesn't matter anymore.



21) *Illustration – The Weather Project, Olafur Eliasson, 2003-2004*
Eliasson often uses basic natural elements in his work such as water, temperature, light and pressure. He creates an experience that is physical, sensory, emotional and spiritual. He represents the imitation of natural phenomena as art, while at the same time revealing the technique used to recreate it. He is not interested in distinct between the nature and machine but the viewer's relationship to both.

¹² Arthur Danto, *At the End of Art*, University Presses of California, Colombia and Princeton, 1998

The use symbolism in art and the effect it has on the people however hasn't gone and continues to play a vital part in the contemporary art. Olafur Eliasson's work The Weather Project can only prove it. We can see it in the installation which was presented as a giant semi-circular form (the Sun) made out of hundreds of mono-frequency lamps, which was reflected in the giant mirror which replaced the ceiling in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern Gallery. There was also a floating mist which was created by special machines.

*The atmosphere which was created by the combination of the dim light of the 'Sun' and the mist had an extraordinary affect on the spectators (*36). For all the duration of being installed the artwork had become a great sensation with the public which seemed to have been drawn to it. People were lying around for hours, gazing at the yellow circle mesmerised and fascinated. They were kissing, hugging and making angel shapes. The yellow circle which symbolised the sun had a great effect on people and made them behave and think differently.¹³*

Art has been a part of human society for thousand years and although its form and its importance had changed, is changing and will change throughout the human evolution I believe it will always be there. Through exploring the art from its beginnings and its original function for shamanic rituals I have come to discover the importance of symbolism in art through out the ages and across the cultures. On the basis of that I have also explored and analysed the constant reappearance of symbolism and its connection with Shamanic beliefs in various art movements. Through investigating various artists and artistic movements and their views, beliefs and philosophies on the role of art and the artists in the society I have come to a conclusion that the role of the artist is a perceptive communicator. I believe that art reflects the society we live in and the role of the artist is as very special one as through his artwork he emphasise things which are around us, but can be overlooked as we live in it.

¹³ Evening Standard, Monday, 22 march 2004, page 3

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