



MAKING IT BETTER

Folk Arts in Pennsylvania Today

Practicing Spirituality

Reflecting [on] Spiritual Truths

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At a recent gathering to celebrate the presence of Bharatanatyam dance in Pennsylvania, one of the presenters referred to this ancient Indian dance form as “the divine truths incarnated” and the dancer’s participation as “a soul’s awakening to its divinity.” After further research, I learned the speaker was referring to a quote made in 1936 by George S. Arundale upon seeing the dance of Shrimati Rukmini Devi – a dancer who has had a significant influence on Asian Indian dancers in Pennsylvania. Arundale explains the dance as “the merging of the individual soul in God” where “every movement, every gesture, every pose, each [accompanying] song, expressed an aspect of such union”.

This is a powerful notion -- that art awakens one’s divinity. We already understand art to be a reflection of belief, but to understand art, especially folk and traditional art, as facilitating one’s connection to the divine illuminates why so much spiritual practice is grounded in and framed by artistic expression. We have only to consider the hymns that move us during midnight mass, the exquisitely wrought illuminations that surround ancient scriptures, the voice of a cantor reverberating through a synagogue, or the rhythms of a sacred dance, to understand how artistic traditions create sacred space, express our spiritual beliefs, and help us communicate with the divine. The artists in Making It Better offer myriad examples of the interrelationship between art and spirituality.

Iconographer Michael Kapeluck reminds us that “Churches and other prayer spaces are very personal places and that altering or creating them requires the support and education of the community.” Iconography is the representation in art of the Deity and other beings and events associated with Orthodox Christianity. They are “written”, not painted, and they are “read” by the viewer, not simply viewed. Thus they engage the believer personally in the messages to be found therein. They require an interaction between the believer and the work of art. For an artist or icon writer, this interaction is at the core of the work. Kapeluck says, “One of the most exciting aspects of writing icons is actually working with the community in the creation of the new piece.” That communal creation process strengthens the power of the icon for the individual when he or she interacts with it in future reverent moments.

In creating sawdust carpets for the Feast of Corpus Christi, Charles Culleiton maintains a 60-year-old tradition that transforms a secular parking lot into a sacred space for practitioners of the Catholic faith in a Pittsburgh neighborhood. In fact, the sawdust carpets have enabled parishioners to see beyond language and cultural differences to focus on what they have in common – their religious beliefs. Since 1968, Holy Martyrs Church in Tarentum has seen two mergers, bringing English, Italian and most recently, Slovak people into a historically German congregation. Mergers decided by authorities outside one’s usual sphere of influence can often create tensions as congregants struggle with losing their familiar worship space. Culleiton explains, “It was making the sawdust carpets, more than any other activity, which helped the parishioners come together during these difficult times.” The carpets are created by a team of parishioners led by Culleiton, who learned from his own father. This collaborative process, combined with the impermanent nature of the ornately designed carpets, enables both artist and parishioner to focus on the most important aspect of this artistic tradition, the spiritual beliefs imbedded in them.

Like Kapeluck's iconography, Temujin Ekunfeo's beaded ritual objects are not just artifacts to be looked at and enjoyed for their beauty. They are spirit-filled vessels—sacred entities that embody Yoruba beliefs. Actively used in religious practice, they are made by initiates who look to the ancestors and Orishas for inspiration. The Orishas are deities who control specific aspects of nature and everyday life and serve as a link between humans and the supreme god Oladumare. Thus, for Ekunfeo, both the process of creation and the use of the objects are a form of communication with the divine. The significance of the process of creating the beaded ritual objects was reinforced by his mentor Gilberto Martinez, who Ekunfeo characterized as “someone who guards jealously, protects fiercely, and unapologetically teaches the traditions as they have been passed down from Latuán.” Born in Africa, Latuán is believed to have come to Cuba in the 1860s on a slave ship where she found disparate practices of traditional Yoruba beliefs. Eventually she became a powerful priestess who imposed an order on Orisha worship that continues to the present. For Ekunfeo to have a direct line back to this significant religious leader, imbues his work with a spiritual authenticity (connection) that others cannot claim.

But it is not only the tangible objects of worship that contain such potency. Songs and the act of singing serve not only as a means for expressing one's beliefs but, as Jerry Jumba notes, for “sharing the love of God's work circulating among us.” For several years, Jumba has studied with, recorded, and transcribed the extensive repertoire of Ann Walko and other master cantors who sing Carpatho-Rus' chants. He describes folk arts as “an expression of the human spirit that rises above the mundane” and sees a direct connection between the beauty of these echoing chants and one's spiritual well-being. It is beauty itself that transports both singer and listener beyond the everyday to a place where prayer and communion with the divine are possible. I have heard Jumba's sonorous voice float above the congregation; heard it transform sunbeams into divine light by the stained glass windows; and found it easy to transcend into Belief.

For Bill Roberson, transcendence means moving away from a focus on the individual in order to connect the community; to bring the group together as one. He dances the traditional dance of his Native Tsoalagi People. As he explains, “Native people view Mother Earth as giving sustenance to all people.... So our steps in touching the Mother Earth as we dance bring us closer to the importance of that thanks for what she has provided.” Like so many other traditional artists, Roberson practices multiple traditions. Not only does he dance, but he makes the leg rattles that dancers wear. The leg rattles are worn to keep beat with the drum and, in doing so, connect the dancer even more closely to the drum. As he explains, “Our Elders talk about the drum beat as the heartbeat of All People. Regardless of the color of our skin, at some point, all of us are healing around the drum.” Roberson creates each piece, performs each dance, and tells each story as a way to convey their spiritual purpose and to pass on the cultural worldview that we are all responsible for each other as a community.

This interrelationship between spiritual practice and cultural identity thrives in many communities. The desire to practice one's belief is often entwined with the desire to ensure the continuity of one's cultural heritage. To Cambodian dancer and ritual tailor Chamroeun Yin, it is as important to create the costumes and masks worn by the dancers who enact spiritual stories as it is for Cambodians in Pennsylvania to remember those stories as part of their cultural identity. During the Angkor period in Cambodia (9th to 13th century), the dance was performed solely in the temples as part of sacred rituals. After the fall of Angkor, the tradition moved into the royal court and became a symbol of the wealth and power of the kings. In the mid-1900s, Queen Sisowath Kossamak introduced the dance tradition to the general public where it became widely recognized as an icon of Khmer culture, often being performed during public events, holidays, and for tourists visiting Cambodia. This ended abruptly with the reign of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s. An estimated 80-90% of all Cambodian artists died under the Khmer Rouge—they either starved to death or were killed because of suspected connections with the former government or with foreign governments, or because they were considered professionals or intellectuals. Artists were among them and many had to lie in order to survive. Yin laments the fact that “There are not so many people now who know all the stories the dances tell, or how they teach Khmer values.” Thus,

when artists were finally given the freedom once again to practice this ancient tradition, it is no surprise that in Diaspora, the cultural significance of this once religious dance often supersedes its ritual significance and is treasured as a symbol of Khmer tenacity and cultural strength.

Chamroeun Yin's experience as dancer, tailor, dresser, and mask maker reminds us that most traditional artists perform multiple roles in their cultural community. This is certainly true of Susan Leviton. Although she is known primarily for her singing of Yiddish women's songs, her first talent is the creation of ketubot for Jewish weddings. A ketubah is a framed hand-illuminated document, each one custom-made to reflect the interests of the couple and affirm their commitment to Judaism. The pieces incorporate a variety of artistic skills such as intricate illustration, paper cutting and calligraphy. For Leviton, who recently began to incorporate papercut into her work, "Discovering historical Jewish papercut art meant connecting to a spiritual sensibility that was once part of everyday life." Not only does traditional Jewish papercut refer to religious texts, it also serves a ritual function. Whether displayed at home or in the synagogue, traditional papercut is tied to a life cycle event or an observance in the Jewish calendar. So, while that spiritual sensibility may no longer be a part of everyday life, Leviton's work enables Jewish couples and families to claim their cultural and religious identity through an art form that connects them with a venerable, long-standing history.

One final example will serve to illustrate the prevalence across cultures of the multiple ways in which art facilitates spiritual practice: by creating sacred space, expressing beliefs and communicating with the divine. I offer this example because it had such a profound effect on me, personally. A few years ago I was part of a small group of travelers who walked up the hillside in a village in Hungary to watch the sun set over Lake Balaton at dusk. Perched among the trees was a modest church with a magnificent view over the lake. Looking through a window into the sanctuary, we spotted the pulpit which looked as if it had been carved by hand. We were told it was made entirely out of one single linden tree. We were intrigued so we sought permission to enter the church and take a closer look. It was vespers and as we entered the cold, dimly-lit church, we were immediately hushed into reverie by the hauntingly exquisite voices of women chanting. There were about eight of them scattered throughout the pews, bundled up in hats, scarves, mittens and winter coats against the cold of the unheated nave. It was clear they had not arrived together. But they certainly were in unison in their prayer. One was leading and the others were responding in an ancient call-and-response form that had been echoing off those stone walls for generations -- singing the prayers that would ensure the spiritual well-being of their families and the town for one more day. I was overcome by the contrast of their beautiful voices and the lovingly-carved pulpit in this starkly chilled place. Though I didn't understand their words, it was clear they were drawing on centuries-old artistic traditions to create a sacred space for the practice and reflection of their spiritual truths.

On a certain level it is impossible to fully grasp the strength and power of all the spiritual traditions that guide and nourish our diverse communities. Yet, as the artistic expressions of these traditions are celebrated, cherished, and preserved, we are awarded a glimpse of how art helps individuals and communities interact with, and awaken, the divine.

Arundale, George S., Shrimati Rukmini Devi and C. Jinarajadasa. "Theosophy as Beauty," Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar Pamphlet No. 208. Chennai: 1936.