Frithjof Schuon: Scenes of Plains Indian Life

by Barbara Perry

The following was the text from the catalog accompanying an exhibit of the art of Frithjof Schuon at the Taylor Museum in Colorado Springs, Colorado, which ran from January 24, 1981 through March 8, 1981.

It is rare indeed to encounter a man who is at one and the same time a great thinker and a great artist. In most cases, a genius for intellectual discernment and the formulation of doctrine is exclusive of a genius for aesthetic perception and artistic creation, and this for the simple reason that the phenomenon of genius normally exhausts itself in a single domain. With Frithjof Schuon, however, the two capacities are bound together: his art is a manifestation of intellectual discernment, and his discernment possesses a quality both moral and aesthetic.

Schuon's intellectual point of departure is the discrimination between the Absolute and the Relative, or between *Atma* and *Maya,* as the Vedantists would say. Knowledge does not derive from reasoning grafted onto physical and psychological experience; on the contrary, it has its source in the pure intellect, which contains all metaphysical and cosmological ideas in its very substance. Man has access to them in principle through "Platonic recollection"; in fact, however, most men are exiled from their spiritual root, so that they must receive the Truth from the outside, through spiritual practice as well as through doctrine.

The artistic side, with Schuon, springs from a consciousness of universal symbolism; for God manifests His Qualities through beauty. There is the beauty of virgin nature and of man and of art; genuine and legitimate art always has something of the sacred in it, whether directly or indirectly. Man lives by Truth and by Beauty; Schuon writes books and paints pictures. His books express the metaphysical doctrine in which all the religious systems and all the spiritual methods have their origin; he thus takes his stand in the perspective of the *philosophia perennis.* In his paintings, Schuon's intention is to express inward truths, and he does this in a manner that is quite simple, spontaneous and natural, and without any affectation of didactic symbolism. Fundamentally, what he portrays are higher realities as lived through the medium of his own soul, and he does so by means of human portraits and scenes taken for the most part from the life of the Plains Indians. But he also has painted a number of pictures of the Virgin-Mother, not in the style of Christian icons but in the form

of the Biblical Shulamite or the Hindu *Shakti.*

Much of Schuon's intellectual knowledge may be accounted for in terms of his extraordinary aesthetic intuition. It suffices for him to see — in a museum, for example — an object from a traditional civilization, to be able to perceive, through a sort of "chain reaction," a whole ensemble of intellectual, spiritual and psychological ideas. An important point in his doctrine is that beauty is not a matter of taste, thus of subjective appreciation, but that, on the contrary, it is an objective and hence obligating reality; the human right to personal affinity — or to "natural selection," if one likes — is altogether independent from aesthetic discrimination, that is to say from the understanding of forms.

A remark is necessary here regarding the symbolism of nudity. It is common knowledge that in Hinduism, as in most other ancient religions — and notably also with the American Indians — nudity has a sacred connotation. It manifests both the primordial and the universal, and it is not without reason that one speaks of the "paradisal innocence" which was before the Fall. Again, there is in hieratic nudity a moral meaning as well as an intellectual one: under the first aspect, nudity — of the Hindu goddesses, in particular — expresses the generosity that welcomes and provides, likewise exemplified in the mystical *lactatio* of the Blessed Virgin; and under the second aspect, nudity indicates the esoteric "unveilings," and it is in this sense that one speaks of the "naked truth." And lastly, let us remember that, according to St. Paul: "Unto the pure, all things are pure."

As a writer, Schuon is recognized as a master of thought. As a painter, he makes no claims for his art, and he does not even desire to be publicly known. Springing as they do from his rich and unique personality, Schuon's paintings nonetheless have a rare value, not only as regards artistic merit but above all because of their gift for manifesting the human soul at its noblest and most beautiful — hence, as a vehicle for Truth — and it is for this reason that we wish to present them to the public.

Frithjof Schuon was born in Basle, Switzerland, on June 18, 1907. His father, a concert violinist and teacher at the Basle Conservatory of Music, was a native of southern Germany, while his mother came from an Alsatian family of German stock. Until the age of thirteen Schuon lived in Basle and attended school there, but the untimely death of his father obliged his mother, for reasons of economy, to return with her two young sons to her family in Mulhouse; and thus it was that Schuon received a French-language education in addition to his German one. At sixteen, Schuon left school to become self-supporting as a textile designer — a type of work which made only the most modest of demands upon the remarkable artistic talent that he had as yet had little opportunity to develop. As a child he had already taken much pleasure in drawing and painting, but he never received any formal training in the arts.

Schuon began very young his search for metaphysical truth, and this urge for understanding led him to read not only all the classical and modern European philosophers but also the sacred doctrines of the East, notably those of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. In Western philosophy it was above all

Plato and Eckhart who awakened an echo in his thought. Among Eastern writings, the *Bhagavad-Gita* was his favorite reading.

Parallel to his interest in philosophy was his love of traditional art; here the painting and sculpture of Japan held a preeminent place in his esteem. He was from his earliest years fascinated by all that was sacred, and his first meeting with a representation of the Buddha made a profound impression on him. It took place in the Ethnological Museum of Basle, where he discovered the Buddha in the form of a magnificent gilded statue of Yakushi, with statues of the Bodhisattvas Seishi and Kwannon seated to either side of him on their lotus thrones.

In the Mulhouse period, Schuon came upon the writings of Rene Guenon, which served to confirm his own intellectual rejection of the modern civilization while at the same time bringing into sharper focus his spontaneous understanding of metaphysical principles and their traditional applications.

As a young man, Schuon went through a year and a half of military service in France, then worked again as a designer in Paris. He took lessons in Arabic at the Paris mosque. In 1931 he frequented the Colonial Exposition in Vincennes, where he could admire the fine full-scale replicas of pagodas and mosques, and even the temple of Angkor Wat, which had been built for the occasion.

In 1932 and again in 1935, Schuon passed several months in Algeria, and after his second stay went on to visit Morocco. At the time of his first contact with Muslim North Africa, the traditional way of life was still largely a living reality. In 1938, he went to Cairo in order to meet Guenon, with whom he had been in correspondence for the past six years. He saw Guenon again a year later as he passed through Egypt on his way to India, a country with whose contemplative climate he had always felt a strong affinity. However, the Second World War broke out, obliging him to return to Europe after only a few days' stay in Bombay. He spent the next several months as a soldier in the French army. Captured by the Germans, he was allowed a certain freedom by virtue of his Alsatian background, and when it appeared likely that the Nazis would oblige Alsatians to enter the German army, he seized the opportunity to escape to Switzerland where, after brief imprisonment, he was given asylum. Some years later, he obtained Swiss nationality.

Schuon settled in Lausanne and shortly began to write. His articles had begun to appear in *Etudes Traditionnelles* — a French Review originally dedicated to the publishing of Guenon — as early as 1933. More recently — from 1963 on — Schuon has been a regular contributor to the English review *Studies in Comparative Religion* (formerly *Tomorrow),* while continuing his collaboration with *Etudes Traditionnelles.* The first of his books — *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* — appeared in 1948 and was soon followed by *The Eye of the Heart* and *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts.* These and his succeeding works were written in French. Earlier he had published a book in German entitled *Primordial Meditation,* as well as two volumes of lyric poetry, also written in his native German. He now has eleven books which have been printed in

English, and his works appear in nine different languages.

In 1949, Schuon married Catherine Feer, the daughter of a Swiss diplomat — German-speaking by origin but, like himself, educated in French from the age of thirteen and, also like himself, highly gifted for painting. It was after his marriage that Schuon began to paint regularly, devoting most of his canvases to depictions of American Indians in their traditional setting. As a boy, Schuon had heard much about the Indians from his paternal grandmother, who when she was a young girl had spent some time in the city of Washington. There she had become personally acquainted with a Sioux member of a delegation of chiefs to the nation's capital, and although she did not accept his offer of marriage, she never forgot her Indian friend or his people and later transmitted her love and admiration for the Indians to her grandchildren.

After painting Indians for several years, Schuon finally met and made friends with a number of Indians — members of the Crow tribe — in Paris in the winter of 1953. They had come to Europe to give performances in a troupe under the auspices of Reginald Laubin and his wife, the well-known performers and preservers of traditional American Indian dances. After Paris, several of the group came to Lausanne for a few days between their theatrical engagements, in order to visit the Schuons — notably Thomas Yellowtail, who has become an important medicine man and a leader of the Sun Dance religion. Five years later, the Schuons travelled to Brussels in order to meet Sioux who had come to give Wild West performances in connection with the World's Fair.

These meetings paved the way for the Schuons' first visit to America, in the summer of 1959, when they were warmly welcomed on the Sioux reservation at Pine Ridge, South Dakota, and the Crow reservation in southern Montana. In the company of Indian friends they visited other regions of the Plains and had the opportunity to attend a Sun Dance at Fort Hall, Idaho on the Shoshone-Bannock reservation. When at Pine Ridge, the Schuons were adopted into the family of Chief James Red Cloud, a grandson of the great chief known to history. The old chief gave Schuon the name of Wambali Ohitika — Brave Eagle — the name of his famous forbear's brother. Later, at an Indian festival in Sheridan, Wyoming, the Schuons were officially received into the Sioux tribe, and Schuon was given the name of Wicahpi Wiyakpa — Bright Star. His wife also received a name from Chief Red Cloud and another at Sheridan, but she gives preference to the first Indian name she was given, Wambali Ovate Win — Eagle People Woman — sent her by old Black Elk, the renowned Sioux medicine man, through the intermediary of their mutual friend Joseph Brown at the time he was recording Black Elk's explanations of the Sioux rites.[1]

In 1963, the Schuons visited the Plains tribes a second time, spending the summer among their Indian friends and once again attending a Sun Dance at Fort Hall. During this trip, Schuon took the opportunity to visit the grave of Black Elk in Manderson, South Dakota, and to renew his acquaintance with the venerable medicine man's son Benjamin in the Black Hills. He had already met him during his first trip out West and then again in the fall of 1962 when the Schuons spent several days in his company in Paris.

In the spring of 1965, Schuon made the first of a series of regular trips to Morocco. He sailed to Turkey in the spring of 1968, where he visited Istanbul, Bursa and Kusadasi — this last in order to permit a number of visits to the House of the Blessed Virgin in its peaceful mountainside setting above Ephesus.

The artistic works of Frithjof Schuon are oil paintings, whose height and width rarely exceed 24 inches. From a stylistic point of view, they combine the traditional rules of pictorial art with the technique of Western painting. Although traditionalist in his observance of certain elementary principles, Schuon limits himself neither to the style of icons nor to that of Oriental art.

The traditional rules just alluded to are these: to avoid a strict observance of the laws of perspective and to use neither foreshortening nor shading — shading, however, being permitted to the extent that relief in faces and bodies may require, as the example of various icons demonstrates. The fact that Schuon combines these rules with a kind of intellectual rigor on the one hand and an adequate observation of nature on the other gives to his painting a powerful originality and exceptional expressiveness. In short, he combines the positive features of Western art with the rigor and symbolism of the Egyptian wall painting or the Hindu miniature. Perhaps one could say that Schuon's work, as regards its technical aspects, lies somewhere between the Hindu miniature and expressionism, while at the same time being flavored with a certain influence from Japan.

Something should be said here of the main themes of Schuon's intellectual and artistic life. One of these themes was foreshadowed in his early encounter with a black marabout who had accompanied other members of his Senegalese village to Basle for the purpose of demonstrating their African culture. When the young Schuon met and talked with him, the venerable old man drew a circle with radii in the sand and explained: "God is in the Center; all paths lead to Him." This metaphysical truth was to become the dominant principle of Schuon's writings, beginning with his first French work, whose title, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions,* is very indicative in this respect.

Another significant theme is his love of virgin nature — a nature he came to know directly only after his marriage, when his young wife introduced him to the Swiss Alps where she had spent much of her childhood. This beneficent contact with God's creation was intensified during his trips to Indian country. For Schuon, virgin nature carries a message of eternal truth and primordial reality, and to plunge oneself therein is to rediscover a dimension of the soul which in modern man has become atrophied.

From the time of his earliest childhood Schuon has been drawn to four things: the great, the beautiful, the childlike, and above all, the sacred. Much in his writings and art and in his life itself can best be understood in terms of this quaternity.

[1] See *The Sacred Pipe* by Joseph Epes Brown, University of Oklahoma Press, 1953.