# Art From The Inside: Seeing And Being

By Sister Mary Simon Corbett, O.S.B.

*"Accuracy of judgment, this is the primary essential of painting."*[1]

*(Leonardo da Vinci)*

SEEING is THE WAY we link with the values of God. Perception at various levels, in various modes, saturates our being. Seeing precedes being, and seeing precedes creation, especially for the painter. I begin with these astonishingly obvious statements because so many people speak of the artistic gift as if it resided principally in the hand, as if painting were a matter of manual dexterity. Only what artists have seen truly will they be able to depict. It is this gift of seeing, of heightened visual awareness, the ability to analyze and organize visually, which characterizes the artist. All painterly skill comes from, and returns to, the critical analysis of eye and spirit. Painters are dealing with visual reality. Unless they have beheld "beauty with the eye of the mind"[22] nothing is possible. When the communion with visual reality is most intensified, then a painter becomes suddenly and wholly a simple capacity for seeing. "Monet is nothing but eyes… but what eyes!"[3] exclaimed Cezanne. The work goes forward with incredible speed or serene showness as this inner sight and outer vision settle together into the appropriate rhythm for the painting on hand: time and eternity. Claudel describes this very well. "While the outer senses give us impressions in succession, sight homologates contrasting and simultaneous ones. The perception of a tree or a wall corresponds to such and such a state of my sensitivity; I make my gaze at this wall and this tree; I make this tree and this wall within myself."[4] Seeing is now being-within. Soon, for a painter, it becomes seeing-without. As artists regard their surroundings with 'accuracy of judgement' they are taking their first step towards painting.

What impels painters to express themselves on canvas? It is the shape of the world without which creates within all that they have to give.

> "Man cannot create a single speck. God creates all that is beside himself. But men of genius are said to create, a painting, a poem, not indeed the colours and the canvas but the design, the character, the air, the plan. How then?—from themselves, from their own minds. And they themselves, their minds and all, are creatures of God."[5]

Here Hopkins seems to situate the artistic impulse in our creativity, in the type of make-up of our mind. We must acknowledge that the origin of an artistic impulse and its execution are mysteries, even to painters themselves. We recall Kandinsky's experience of seeing in his studio a vision of a beautiful painting, his first abstract composition, long before he painted it. At the time he did not recognize it as his.[6] The origin of a painting is beyond our grasp. A photographer looking at a painting with me declared, "You cannot say how you did it, can you? Artists never can." In fact, painters are usually amazed by their work, and have a sense of being privileged to conduct to the canvas something beyond themselves, something too immensely spiritual to have been achieved by mere training and technique. This is the heart of the mystery.

It is here, somewhere, as the impact of the infinite Being of God meets the entity of the painter through spiritual-material, visual form that the compulsion to engage in creating art form begins. A moment of an absolute, pure spiritual impact of the inner essence of a visual reality moves the painter to convey this on to the canvas. A suddenly heightened visual awareness turns us towards the place of painting. Sometimes reading a definition like, "shape is that in which a solid

1 Leonardo da Vinci, *Notebooks of Leonardo*, transl. by E. MacCurdy, London, 1938, p. 241.

2 Plato, *Symposium*, unknown transl., London, 1934, 212c.

3 Nicholescu, V., *Monet*, Bucharest, 1976, p. 11.

4 Claudel, Paul', *L' art poétique*, New York, 1960, p. 17.

5 Hopkins, G.M., *The notebooks and papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. Address on Exx ed. by H. House, London, 1937, p. 301.

6 See Rebay, H., ed., *In memory of Wassily Kandinsky*, New York, 1945.

terminates, or more briefly, it is the limit of a solid",[7] evokes a similar response. There is a recurrent factor in these impacts: the recognition of an innerness of the Absolute Essence and Purity of Being in all our surroundings, accompanied by an awareness of the immense awesomeness of the Presence of Being. There is always an *incisive quality* in this visual experience. It is surely this which made Cezanne exclaim, "I have to be let alone when I *meditate."*[8] To sum up: God is there. Perhaps Hopkins's words 'instress' and 'inscape' describe it. There is a spiritual content within the visual: the two are inseparable. The painter sees the world with a clear-cut heightened awareness of its spiritual nature, complex formation and endless juxtapositions of surface with surface. "Beauty it may be is the meet of lines/Beyond, and one within the looker's eye."[9]

What of the atheist painter? The experience is the same: the atheist artist is one who knows God but cannot yet name him.

Painters, writers and composers find that their work is a search and a discovery, not an expression of a conscious personal statement. I find the idea that painting is concerned with self-expression abhorrent. For the painter stands to the absolute of visual reality "as the infinitesimal to the infinite".[10] Both in observation of the world arid in putting paint on the canvas, the artist is in an attitude of outgoing/receptivity. The process is akin to adoration in prayer, 'O the wonder of it'. There simply is no room, no time, no interest in one's own views of anything because the person is being displaced by the wonder. With poets, composers and painters this attitude is common. Roger de Grey notes, "one is concerned with something so much greater than oneself."[11] Alan Ridout suggests, "one is concerned with something beyond oneself, it is when the ego enters in that the blight occurs",[12] whilst Collaer states, "in the presence of nature an artist does not think of himself; he receives everything from nature, he is impressed by it, without further reflection, and lets himself be carried away by the joy of contemplation."[13]

By piling words upon each other in an *impasto* technique I have given some idea of the painter's inner experience. In sequence we have something like this: seeking for something painters find their object in the communion of encounter. In the engagement of painting, participating in the creativity of God, they are enabled to fashion new entities in spiritual-visual form.

Later the painter may find therein spiritual insights, experiences of a lifetime. However, these non-visual ingredients, which may have been absorbed unconsciously, are not the concern during the process of painting. The concern then is with the painterly content of the work: line, colour, texture and form in which the primary spiritual essence, that essential eternal quality, is embedded. This is true of both abstract and figurative painting.

Most statements we make about art have to be qualified. By now, perhaps, I may have created the impression that a painter is like a vacuum flask and art solely concerned with beauty. We know our world is overwhelmed by every imaginable expression of sin in all its ugliness. God's plan for us deals with sin, and no artist can gloss over it, for painting is dependent on our whole experience of life. Art must state the whole case, not merely a part, and the whole case is beauty, truth and goodness together. We must not present one aspect as if it were the whole truth, and so indoctrinate our civilization with yet more sin and despair. Balthasar's work has reminded us of the importance of beauty. Perhaps artists need to be reminded that their apprehension of beauty is a gift to be used for the world's salvation. How else can civilization be handed on, much less renewed? "Give me inner beauty and let the outside be in harmony with what lies within; and may I have such wealth as only the self-restrained man can bear or endure."[14] This prayer of Socrates, at the end of the *Phaedrus*, is singularly appropriate for the artist and our times. Confronted by violence in our civilization, and the arts

7 Plato, *Mem*, transl. by W.K.C. Guthrie, London, 1956, 76A.

8 Vollard, A., *Paul Cezanne*, Paris, 1924, p. 143.

9 Hopkins, G.M. *op. cit.*, p. 50.

10 Ibid., p. 331.

11 Personal communication with Roger de Grey in 1982.

12 Personal communication with Alan Ridout in 1989.

13 Nicholescu, V., *op. cit.* p. 20.

14 Brion, Marcel, *The bible in art*, ed. by Lucy Norton, London, 1956, p. 13.

are vehicles of civilization, we shall find that statements of violence in art turn us towards harmony and perfection. The presence of violence in a painting is a plea for peace. Chesterton once said of a painter that "his right hand taught him terrible things"[15] (Ps 45, 4). In art we can "christen... wild-worst Best",[16] and this on a community level. Since the tragedy of Piper Alpha, my cousin's rig, I have repeatedly yet unwillingly followed the inner compulsion to paint Piper Alpha in an abstract expressionist manner. Amazingly, the outstanding impression each painting conveys is not the external violence but the fortitude of the men. This is indeed 'art from the inside'. "The great artists are like deep sea divers who on our behalf plunge into the depths of the unconscious and return to the surface carrying images and icons of great power."[17] Sometimes painters are aware that their work has been brushed by the finger of God, and it is no coincidence that the painting 'Piper Alpha IV' now hangs in the same collection as an under-seascape of the entire Forties Oilfield I painted in 1980 entitled, 'Community influences interweaving and beyond'. We need our 'Guernica' paintings especially, it seems, in peacetime, "for the cries of history's victims are the voice of the living God."[18] Painters are not given the freedom to choose their subject. They cannot create *ex nihilo* as God does, but trap a slice of God's creation in art form. Originality in art work comes from that struggle of the intuitive instincts grappling directly with our visual experience. This brings into existence a new glimpse of the truth, processed through the spirit of the painter. This process is a spontaneous outburst of spiritual apprehension in art form, not a conscious application of technique to painterly problems. The struggle, however, comes at those fallow times when painters must refuse to abandon the quest. They must enter the apparent void, not displace the quest by a solution which is but a copy of a previous piece of work. If the pushing into the void of true creativity is abandoned, the painting is not corresponding with the spirit of the painter, and is merely an essay in technical competence. "Can something, hope, wish, day come, not choose not to be."19[19] The painter must bring into being from within, every time anew, and not from a statement already made, because to shift a statement from one painting to another is not truly creative. It is now *this* painting which is being created, a new living whole, not a bit of that one stuck on to this one. All must come from the spirit. Leonardo proclaims, "The greatest defect in a painter is to repeat the same attitude and the same expressions."[20] In painting, the voids or blocks have to be resolved from within. It is at this point that the essence of what we have seen blazes forth into paint. If the vision tarries, the painter must wait for it, not substitute a 'text'… for the creative artist speaks "as one having authority, not as the scribes" (Mt 7, 29).

Aristotle asserts, "all art is concerned with coming into being."[21] Painters are engaged in a search, and what they are about to discover at the tip of the brush is there because they are moving towards the values of God, or God himself. In painting sessions they are communicating not only with these values and with God, but also with other people. This factor is so deep within that whilst painting they are unaware of it. Most painters and composers are reluctant to show an unfinished work, but the instant it is finished, their first thought is to share it. This is an indication of the presence and importance of communication in their work. "Creative power is ineffable. It remains ultimately mysterious. And every mystery affects us deeply."[22]

It has been suggested that the spiritual in painting is revealed,

> "in the relationship between artist: materials and techniques: observer... So [while] the communication of a painting is assessable… there must still be in its *essence*… a mysterious value of its own. What is truly spiritual in art, and can be said to have a spiritual content, is that which comes out of a wrestling with God in a prayer of life. It is like Love: it has to be

15 See Williams, H.A., *God's wisdom in Christ's cross,* London, 1960, p. 29.

16 Hopkins, G.M., "The Wreck of the Deutschland", *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* ed. by R. Bridges, London, 1931, p. 19.

17 Roose-Evans, J., *Inner journey, outer journey*, London, 1987, p. 188.

18 Lamb, Matthew, "Christian spirituality and social justice", *Horizons* 10, 1983, p. 49.

19 Hopkins, G.M.: 'Carrion Comfort', *op. cit.*, p. 61.

20 Leonardo, *op. cit.*, p. 269.

21 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, transl. by H. Rackham, London, 1926, VI, 3, 1140a 11.

22 Klee, Paul, *Notebooks*, Volume II, *The nature of nature*, Basel, 1956, p. 63.

experienced to be recognised as the essential ingredient of life."[23]

The spiritual content of a painting is the artist's experience and God's use of the painting to 'speak for himself'. Neither reduces the painting to mere self-expression or a pedagogical enterprise. Spirit plus technique equals spiritual experience in paint. The spirit is there in the correct use of the medium, the balancing of the 'academic' rules as the painting is built up with perfection of achievement. 'Getting it right', the painter's sole criterion in analysis, is the heart of the spiritual content. Life experience is mirrored in the painting, and its execution depends on physical competence to a finished degree for the spiritual impact. 'Getting it right' reflects God's perfection in relationships of balance in the elements of the painting. A vista of the eternal opens: God seeking, finding and extending us through painting. A painting is a glimpse of what is eternal in God; like him it is indivisible, for every part of it should be essential.

We perceive the spiritual content of a painting only if we are prepared to look at art in its own terms; and in the process of painting as we aim "to achieve an art of pure spirit… the expression of pure spirit in visual terms".[24]

Is there a spirituality of the painter relevant to us all? Since "we may justly speak of painting... as related to God Himself"[25] we may expect a universal application of some aspects of the painter's approach to living. A painter's spirituality is two-fold: the gift of seeing, and the discipline of living and working so that *seeing* truly becomes *being* in both person and paint. Awareness has to be supported by the disciplines of single-mindedness; acceptance of the demands of solitude and silence on the one hand, and communication on the other; finding a balance of interdependence in creativity yet living with the enigma of creation. Painters must also find a way of living with the ebb and flow of a creativity which is not theirs to command at will, and with the effects upon themselves of this variability. Essentially a painter's spirituality is embedded in enthusiasm.

What I say about the spirituality of a painter is coloured by the fact that I am engaged in abstract painting and belong to a Benedictine community whose work, as Archbishop Michael Ramsey once reminded us, is "Prayer, plus prayer, plus prayer, plus prayer."[26]

For St Benedict everything material is vested in the spiritual: "Let him regard everything as the sacred vessels of the altar."[27] This chimes in with the attuned eye of the painter. I am most conscious of God when I meet him in what I term 'sighted prayer'. I mean, not the focussing of visual attention on an object like an icon, but seeing the presence of God as a spiritual essence, a visual consciousness of presence, *entirely vested in sight.* This happens as a total gift, but with the disciplined and deliberate regard of the presence of God it may become a way of prayer open to us all. God's presence in sighted prayer and situating oneself before him link profoundly with the painter's visual gift. As Klee explains, "Art does not reproduce the visible, rather it makes the invisible, visible... We reveal the reality behind visible things, thus expressing the belief that the visible world is merely an isolated case in relation to the universe, and that there are many other latent realities."[28] Furthermore, Peter Walker, Bishop of Ely, points out, "It is not the paintings *and* the spiritual life. The paintings *are* the spiritual life."[29] In sighted prayer a painter finds the source of inspiration in its purest essence: *ecce adsum.*

Single-mindedness is essential. Painters have to situate their mental preoccupation in the visual and withdraw from dispersing attention in all directions. Creativity does not cease when we lay down the brush! It will jump, like a tiger, on anything at hand, therefore it must be schooled.

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[23] Personal communication with Aelred Arneson, Ewell Monastery, in 1985.
[24] Personal communication with Alan Ridout in 1981.
[25] Leonardo, *op. cit.*, p. 213.
[26] Ramsey, Michael, Archbishop of Canterbury, Sermon at the dedication of the Abbey Church, West Mailing, 1966.
[27] St Benedict, *Holy Rule*, Chapter 31, transl. by F. Vasey, Mailing, 1931, p. 52.
[28] Klee, Paul, *Notebooks*, Volume I, *The thinking eye*, Basel, 1956, pp. 76-78.
[29] Personal communication with Peter Walker, Bishop of Ely, in 1985.

"Above all he should keep his mind as clear as the surface of a mirror."[30] A painter's mind is always charged with an intense degree of concentration. This must be directed to an aliveness to visual reality which means forgoing verbalized, analytical thought. An artist is a 'thinking eye', and cannot both 'see' and 'think'. There has to be a choice. The artistic and the verbal cannot be harnessed simultaneously. The ancient Chinese painters well understood that in painting, "value is not a question of 'having' or 'doing' but 'being'''.[31] A painter learns to direct attention to the painting on hand before going to the easel, and thus listens to the painting within, which is felt but not yet seen. "The creative artist", says Ridout,

> "is acutely aware of something which exists somewhere but which is missing from the world, only a piece of music, perhaps, but nevertheless a symbol requiring articulation. He worries away and one day, if he is lucky, he finds that he has provided it. A marvellous moment! He is purged. But for how long? A day or two, maybe. Then a nagging feeling starts in him again which, with experience, he recognises. Another work is waiting... It is not satisfaction that he has just finished a piece. He must again be searching, struggling with the form, the melody, the harmony, everything that will add up to a new reality."[32]

Painters accept solitude. Their primary way of understanding life, stating questions, beginning the search, will be via the brush. These essential voyages of discovery and charting of new lands will happen in no other way. Artists learn that if they speak too soon of the work there is nothing left to paint: they have already communicated it and it is gone. Unfinished work is guarded from every comment, favourable or otherwise. It is what *they* are seeing that matters, they cannot paint the mind of another or allow other minds to influence the painting. All this adds up to isolation: solitude and silence. It is not a price always willingly paid! The painter accepts the yoke of dedication. Painting takes over the finer part of the person. It is a real self-surrender. Spiritually it means being willing to be silent, receptive and generous in expanding ourselves on something no one else may value at all. These are lessons which all can apply to any relationship or work. The actual situating of the work in solitude is costing, but eventually the outcome is a deeper communion if we are fortunate, but not all painters are in their lifetime. Even within the artistic circle a painter seldom speaks of developing work but waits until creativity has crystallized into paint. These exchanges are chiefly support in the wilderness of creativity rather than concern with the actual work. It is communion with the painting that matters, for others and for ourselves. The painter understands more of life, is more understanding of others, because of the work, and finds that it has spoken for others. "For the artist, dialogue with nature remains a *conditio sine qua non.*"[33] We learn these lessons as we accept the mystery of our uniqueness.

Painters constantly grapple with the enigma of creation. Taking the ultimate risk of being or not being with every brush stroke, they never know if the result will be a painting, or will be scraped off the canvas. They are always stepping into the place of judgement. 'Have I got it right?' is a continuous question bound up with vision and integrity. It. is the only criterion which counts. It is not a question painters set aside with the brush, it reverberates continually in every area of life. They ask the question of civilization, of God. It is the *Angst* of existence. This questioning puts the artist at risk.

> "The ideal we are all being educated to believe in, is the extravert useful person. Why? The answer is because the extravert useful person is the most exploitable type. You cannot exploit so easily the man who is constantly reflecting upon life, and upon his conditions; who questions existence, who is troubled by desires, which seem to the useful person, not only beyond his comprehension, but utter nonsense, to be quelled by a nice practical common-sense society, where things make sense because they are useful. History shows that

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[30] Leonardo, *op. cit.*, p. 259.
[31] Speiser, Werner, *China: spirit and society*, London, 1960, p. 25.
[32] Harding, James, 'Composers of today: Alan Ridout', *Performance*, Winter, 1980, p. 45.
[33] KIee, Paul, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

you cannot so easily exploit the artist and the poet."[34]

We have to find a way of living between over-exposure to influences outside us and too narrow a withdrawal within ourselves. Balanced between the two, always evaluating both, the painter realizes that sharing occupies a centre point between reception and response. Impacts besieging the eye are brought to this point as, charging the brush with paint, the artist moves to the canvas. Its texture evokes the first response. The painting then makes its impact, drawing each brush stroke out. Absorbed in the visual, the painter experiences reality as quality of being, enfolded in the elements of the painting.

> "Whilst the artist is bending every effort to group the formal elements so purely and logically that each has to go exactly where it does and none trespass on its neighbour, a layman, looking over his shoulder, will utter these devastating words: 'That's a very poor likeness of Uncle.' If the painter has control over his nerves, he will think: 'Bother Uncle, I must get on with my building'..."[35]

Recognizing this as a spiritual factor is important. With the continual intake and output of creativity artists are on shifting ground yet they find the answers to their questions are there within as they paint. On resuming painting halfway through my noviceship after a break of two and a half years, I decided to make the most of the unique opportunity to work uninfluenced by other painters. As an enclosed Benedictine I chose to paint for ten years without seeing the work of other painters, and develop without reference to any aesthetic theories other than ones I was learning from within myself. This experience reaffirmed the importance of independent thought. The painter is called to a meeting with the absolute in the visual. Nothing can replace this personal encounter. This is what painting is about. While the world becomes smaller through instant communication, the painter reminds us that an inner citadel is essential if we are to make a considered response. We must take time to receive and reflect for only thus can the quality of our spirit be impressed upon our response.

Enthusiasm has long been unfashionable. Consider the thousands of brush strokes in one painting. To live concentrated at the point of a brush is only possible if we are consumed with enthusiasm. Fortunately it is the hallmark of a painter's spirituality. Even in our apathies there is a degree of vehemence! Enthusiasm, urgency, caring, perfection: all stem from the primary question, 'Have I got it right?' The painter lives always at the ultimate of non-retractable statements which must be right, perfect for all time and there for others.

> " … in that communion only, beholding beauty with the eye of the mind, he will be enabled to bring forth, not images of beauty, but realities (for he has hold not of an image but a reality) and bringing forth and nourishing true virtue to become the friend of God and be immortal, if mortal man may…"[36]

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Sister Mary Simon Corbett O.S.B. [Order of Saint Benedict] is a member of the Anglican Benedictine Community of St Mary's Abbey, West Malling, Kent, England. She has continued to paint since entering the community, specializing in abstract painting.

[34] Collins, Cecil, *The vision of the fool*, London, 1947, p. 2.
[35] Klee, Paul, *op. cit.*, p. 89.
[36] Plato, *Symposium*, unknown transl., London, 1934, 212c.