

## *A Tower of Mirrors A Reflection on Art as Theology*

by  
Nalini Jayasuriya

Writer, musician, and artist, Nalini Jayasuriya has, as Luce Moore Professor, served on the faculties of several universities in the world, including Yale University, her alma mater in the United States. Currently she resides in Sri Lanka where she works as an artist. Nalini Jayasuriya is known for a brilliant palette of colors.

*Art is a tower of mirrors;  
The images may be complex  
and numberless;  
What one sees is not real—  
but what is Real  
is what the images inspire . . .*

*Miracles, unheeded  
miracles surround us.*

*There is wonder  
in what appears ordinary,  
and centered in our material being  
is a waiting spiritual power  
that envisions and translates  
ideas into radiant certainty.*

*This is the moment  
without past or future—  
the moment when concept form  
colour and iconography  
meet in a glorious  
unparallel enthusiasm.*

*In the West, art is authoritative,  
objective, resolute—*

*In the East, it is enigmatic and pervasive:  
One sees—the other dreams  
but both are ways to illumination.*

Professor John Wesley Cook, my distinguished professor at Yale Divinity School, once said, “Art is perceived through ecstasy, where one’s sensibilities are stretched to the realization of a mystical reality.” One understands both splendor and discontent only through experience, and art can provide a sublime and awesome wisdom about both.

I watch birds. I find a certain ecstatic freedom watching a sky full of birds—knowing the separate holiness of each little creature. The thought in a creative person is a sky full of birds, and each creative form carries its own magic. The stillness of a bird is the silence of movement. It is like the instant when a thought like a bud is plucked and opens a flower in your hand—the flight of a bird is a thing of wonder. Endless, free, soaring—recklessly certain; tracing itself into an untraceable limitless freedom: free, unburdened, without memory or knowledge, the artist—like the bird—carries nothing but rapture, moving

with it each time as if for the first time.

In the Temple of Man in Luxor, Egypt, is an ancient picture of a bird. It has a human head, and its name is Ba. Ba is stillness. Drawn with a fine fluid economy of line and color, Ba is symbolic of the magical secrecy of Egyptian art and religion. To understand the reality and properties of the bird, we kill with scientific ease, dissect the substance, calculate, analyze, rationalize, and produce an account of the bird that is logical, literal, and fearfully reasonable. Do we lose something in this process of interpretation? Do we obscure an understanding of the vast complex pattern of meaning that is a bird? Of its sense and spirit? In our cerebral accuracy, do we lose something of the elusive scent and symbolic enterprise of the bird as it ascends and soars through uncharted ways, denying the definitions and limitations of the intellect? Have we, in our exactness, so lost the will of freedom from the bond of knowledge? Have we lost our way in constructing our road? And, have we lost irrevocably the Essence of Bird?

Constantin Brancusi, a remarkable Roumanian sculptor, has made thirteen variations of a bird in space; each perfectly poised, swift, sudden, intense: studied forms, retold, contrived with sophisticated skill and excellence; each bird in the space of the intellect. Ba remains unmoved, aloof in the mythical space of Dream Time—his thirteen descendants visually translated and described, sing in a detailed and specified twentieth-century sky. Can the magical world survive, does it, in a mechanized eye?

I come from a part of the world where Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam work, worship, and hope together; where a lingering magic of unremembered spiritual wonder infuses a persistent hopefulness. Death is too common and familiar to be feared: what we cannot comprehend or accept is extinction. So the practice of



Nalini Jayasuriya  
*Tree of Life*  
Oil on canvas

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religion in Asia is constantly, and often silently, visible. And the arts, inspired by these religions, are icons with overwhelming power of myth and sacred belief, that have rested fear and anxiety in an awesome and enduring array of form and colour.

An ancient Aztec poem says, "They had no poet, so they died." Can one diminish the power of art in our lives? Art in its myriad manifestations, from prehistoric to this age, is a commentary of ideas and attitudes of an environment. But most importantly, art of both place and period is witness of its truth. Art, particularly religious art, is an act of faith and commission—an act of empowerment without alternatives.

There is a galaxy within us; an unpredictable mysterious portion of our being, beyond the constraints of the rational and reasonable, that has through time, surprised the world with profound and enduring expressions of anguish and celebration. This is the undeniable power of the artistic enterprise; it is total, passionate, and transforming. . . . Each constituent in creative expression—each line, space, colour, and form—each pattern of sound and silence—each gesture and mood, is an individual statement from a collective consciousness.

The sacred arts of the world project the interrelatedness of all life and expectation, more vividly and conclusively than anything else does; and this unique power can express, through a single form or sound, the belief or protest of a whole community or race of people. The icons of the world may appear different, but the intention is the same: it is to translate and transform ideas and beliefs into meaningful and valid forms of reality and truth.

Art is disclosure. Art informs, inspires, idealizes, sanctifies—art asks and answers from a universal vocabulary of experience, differing sometimes in interpretation, but not in meaning. The needs of the human are the same, and the sacred icons of the world that serve these needs remain undiminished.

Artists have, for centuries, been preoccupied with concerns about the validity of the arts, of their integrity and value in society. Is art an accessory or accompaniment to life, or an intensely vital component of human response? How important and necessary are and will the arts be in a computerized, instant, disposable world? How long

and how well will beliefs in the mysterious and the sacred last? How much will the imagination be able to buy and to sell?

The history of art, unlike science or philosophy, is disquieting. It is not a progressive history, but one of upheavals, explosions, and reversals. Emotions, ideas, and beliefs, confessed or denied, have over the centuries dictated new forms—sometimes irrational or revolutionary responses to the varying conditions of life. Art arrives through a restlessness to discover and confess the fears and hopes of the human race; and the concern of both art and religion is not so much for meaning as for certainty—a certainty that circumvents fear, and outwits the moods of inexorable nature.

Sacred art makes durable enduring immutable icons of all time and space—undiminished icons, celebrating the unceasing hope of reconciliation, renewal, and return.

Art offers an alternative reality to life—a reality that traces a line from the known to the miraculous. The artful language of myth, metaphor and movement, of image and space, have been the undiminished sources, texts, and symbols of the faith and speculation of the human race. The real and unreal are part of each other—we have the flayed crucified body and the renewed Lazarus; and the impulse and spiritual recklessness that we know as art. Art is swift, fleeting, impulsive, unpredictable; art is elusive, magical, inconclusive; in its manifestation it is a unitary ideal with plural expression. In our twentieth century, as form, color, scale, and movement are being assessed anew, both artist and theologian have made a passionate personal inquiry into what sacred art really means; it is an inquiry that involves us all. Do we now declare a new cosmos, another reality, and a new judgment of the universe? Is this unexpected art a reversal of values and artistic integrity? Or is it acceptable because our world is less susceptible; or perhaps more curious?

People in the West, where a healthy curiosity and restlessness exist, often search for differences in the artistic enterprises of East and West. The sacred art of the West, of Christianity, is confession—the sacred art of the East is an art of invocation. In the Buddhist world, it is not presence, but absence, that is celebrated; it is not form but non-form that expresses the Buddhist ideal. A particular mood, stance, gesture, or



Nalini Jayasuriya  
*Ark of the Covenant*  
Stained Glass

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expression, limits the universality and infinity of wisdom that must belong to the enlightened being. So the introspective mannered Buddha image, in its enchanted orbit, does not compel our gaze or our speculation.

The human race expresses its ideas and beliefs through particular forms, and these have become our icons of belief and disbelief. There is nothing more affirming than the articulation of realities that have surpassed the superficial and repetitions that are neither predictable nor exhausted, but are an enlightened wisdom. Transcendent wisdom undergirds all true expression, and the artist as visionary and interpreter is a precious player in time and space. Art imitates, sublimates, exalts life, freeing the vision from anecdote; offering its radiant peace to all who would receive it.

In the ninth century, Kukai, the founder of Shingon, an esoteric form of Buddhism in Japan, observed that “the secrets of essential Truth can be depicted in art; for art reveals to us the state of perfection.” What really is the state of perfection? Is it the power to interpret and inform beyond contextual meaning? Is it the discipline of tradition and institution? Is it ceremonial magic? Is it presence, absence, witness, or expected reference? Is art entertainment? Is art transcendence? Art has been called a power of living—the numinous elation of renewal. Is art all of these? Or none?

When I was four years old, my beautiful Dutch Sunday School teacher told me a story that begins at night. Night, in all cultures, is used metaphorically to suggest a time of unknowing, of risk, of absence: it also suggests inactivity that often precedes revelation: the Gethsemane garden and the listening forest of the Buddha come to mind. Nicodemus went out into the night and found Jesus. The story remains alive in me because it is a story without an end; the night of Nicodemus is a story of a beginning. Art, in its manifold forms and appearances, is for me always a beginning. It is a release from natural and human laws—an escape from unceasing repetitive and inexorable order. Art is a compulsion and a gift that enables one to search for the miraculous, with the spiritual curiosity and audacity of Nicodemus. Who knows what the night of unease can offer? Who knows what it can bring?

The rod blooms and the Virgin bears a Son; the harlot sees the risen Lord; Nicodemus seeks and finds Jesus

expecting answers to his confusion; Jesus gives him questions to which he must search for answers.

I am Asian and rejoice in the ancient religions, traditions, and cultures of my world. We also have our prejudices and assumptions, and express our beliefs through our particular cultural and religious intentions and forms. But we feel and believe deeply, seeking to understand rather than to analyze, because we in the East sense the mystical and mysterious that pervades and persists in all life. Buddhist Tibet creates profound and beautiful art to open windows from the mundane world onto a splendored universe. Hinduism astonishes with its recurring dance of creation, destruction, and renewal. Islam writes its beliefs on the contoured melody of its domes and walls in calligraphic magic. And the immediacy and sublime power of the Christian world, in its Gothic language, defies even the most reverent and exalted description.

I have been described as a multimedia artist. I do not know what justifies this, but as a poet and writer, I rejoice in the returning sound of threaded words; as a musician, I hear the silence between sounds; I look for schemes of light in the stained glass windows I have made and feel the resonant circles in my sculpture and pottery. I also paint. And as a painter, never taught, I pursue relentlessly (but with Asian composure) a creative expression of ideas in renewed forms. It takes both courage and conviction to reject the familiar and universal, and to express one's visions and ideas through one's own discernment. Sacred art is confessions and affirmation of faith, bearing its own integrity, values and dimensions as one knows it. Through the freedom that art affords, I feel the torment and exhilaration of the life of Jesus Christ and, through art, I have understood more deeply the divine splendor and discontent. Art is for me an act of faith and commission. In its most profound order, it is an empowerment without alternatives. It is a sublime and awesome wisdom of the mind and heart.

I live on one of the most beautiful seashores of the world. Since I was young I have loved to run lines in the silken sand—finding surprising forms that appear and disappear in silence. Art traces the sublime with an inquiring finger, often surprising itself like the sand images on the seashore.

I have often been asked *why* I paint.

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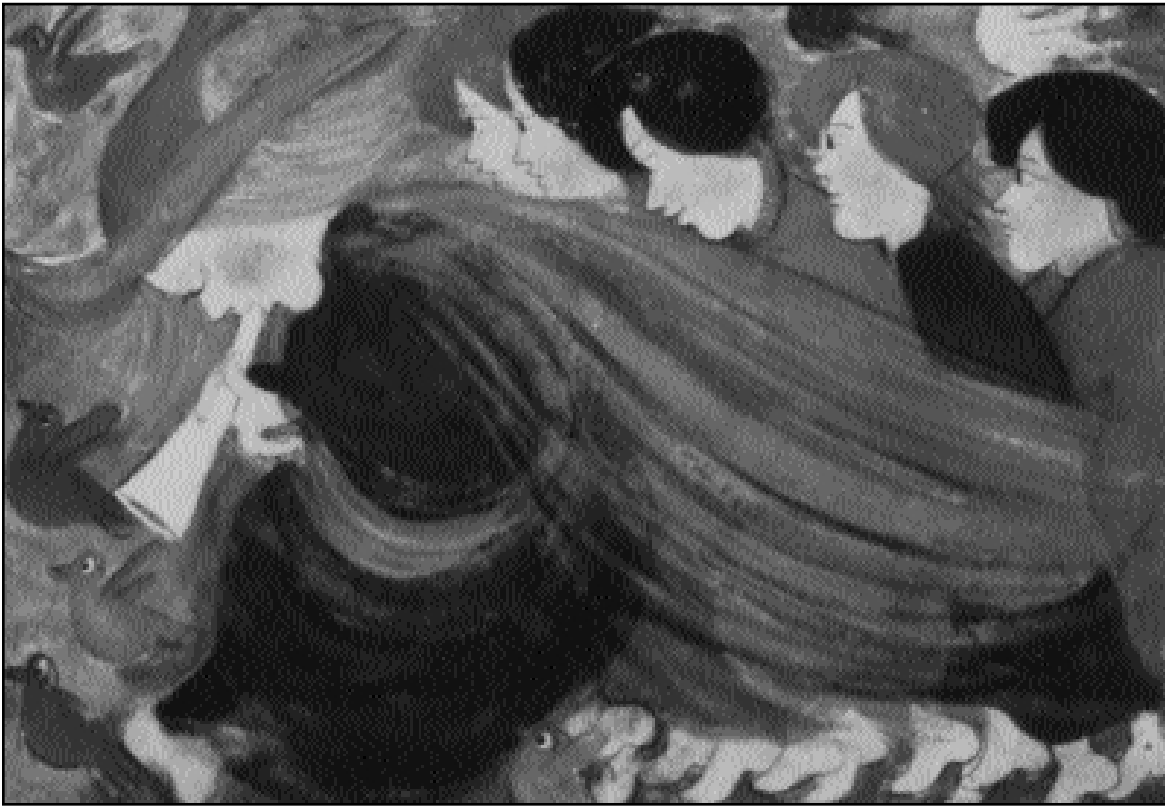
My answer is that I do not know. Recently, a friend asked *how* I paint. Not really understanding the question, I could not answer immediately. But then I remembered and replied, "I follow the night / not into its darkness / but into

its stars."

Sacred art celebrates the reality of God. This is our freedom and our illumination; the illumination of Truth—the illumination of stars—the stars that God has made for us. ❖

Nalini Jayasuriya  
*Magi Bringing Gifts of  
Gold, Frankincense and the  
Dove of Peace*  
Oil on canvas





Nalini Jayasuriya  
*Prophet*  
Oil on canvas

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