

My Disc of Gold

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I began to study painting in 1932, and then sculpture. I began to paint in 1948, after the war. At that time I could no longer face the comfort, security, the thinking and living by tradition to which I was born and had been accustomed. I went to live in a one-room, cold water flat for seventeen dollars a month on Stanton Street, just off the Bowery. I did not paint as I had studied, reproducing the object through an art of illusion; I painted the image of the object, that rose up within me as emotion, that impelled me to paint, in its own time, not mine. This was my first conversion, in 1948.

The tenement facades across the street began to bloom within me, to grow to an image that palpitated with multiple suffering within them; and within me as well no doubt. Blocks of identical tenements, identical miseries repeated street after street as I had seen them repeated in dressing stations in the war, in hospital corridors, and in the numbered huts of concentration camps. The Bowery, Stanton Street, Mulberry Street, Spring Street. The roof eaves, of Victorian design, flourished in elegant scrolls while over the facades crawled the black iron and shadows of fire-escapes. With the iron scrawl of ink on wet paper, I'd cancel out the Victorian elegance of my own background. And on the sidewalks below, wandered and often died, the alcoholics. The dead were not always immediately recognized as dead. This was the first time I was alone and solely responsible for my life, which now I began to create in my first paintings.

I lived inside my material: the smells, sounds, the painfully tender spring light of the Bowery. I elaborated the visual object with as many meanings of itself as I could perceive. My first paintings were small oils on panels, blocked with a spatula and incised with an awl.

Compositions of a horizontal strip of sky and a deep block of houses. In creating images from the chaos of my surroundings, I began to give shape to myself.

I moved away from the single street to a thirtieth story terrace, and the facade of the tenement became the face of the city: all a black mesh at night, confused, contorted, and relieved by lost and wandering lights into which I incised as though to destroy it. Over the death which I created of the Black City arose an orange moon. This moon which rose unconsciously from the depths of my spiritual need was to become, although in various forms, for the next ten wandering years, a Star of Bethlehem, the symbol and search of my salvation.

There was much resentment in my painting at this time: protest against my disciplinarian Puritan upbringing. I wanted only to get back to Italy, where the values of life were not veiled by psychoanalytical and existential jargon, or limited by the selfish interests of materialism, but were seen in totally human terms, and absolute, which spring from the supernatural. (By "materialism", I mean a certain foetal, spiritually stunting search and pursuit of creature comfort). I had been a corpsman during the war in Italy, and the succouring of others' sufferings, the feeling of being needed, had constituted a rebirth for me. At a certain moment, I suddenly became aware of my own free existence, and I found the courage and the liberty to being to express it in the language which was inevitable for me: painting.

I felt that I belonged in Italy, where nothing was expected of me but of my talents which were accepted as God had given them. And where, of all human expressions, art was the most respected. For many of us artists who came to Italy immediately after the war, and who might have been shattered in America into nega-

tive and protesting abstractionism, Italy was a guidepost to reality, because it gave us love. Italy offered us the courage, the conviction and the joyousness of being artists.

I went to Venice because its fantastic aspect of a city in the water offered escape from the materialistic world which, after the war, particularly disgusted me. Venice and New York are both dreams of stone on the sea; one is horizontal, the other is vertical. They both present an over-all image proclaiming everywhere their character in a single mass rather than in conspicuous parts. They are both romantic cities. Venice resists the present and holds to the past with the same tenacity with which New York resists the past and yearns for the future. I loved Venice for the white of its stone, for what Venice does to the color white, when the violent light of August dives into the cage of the Piazza like a disc of fire, and the Campanile is liberated and tossed into the sky. Into my spatuled masses of stone, I wove with the point of the awl the endless dream of light along the windows and arches of the Piazza and the facades of the Grand Canal.

The grilled and raucous face of the Bowery became the melodious facade of the Palazzo Reale where no longer wandered shadows of men, but the youth of a people rising from the ashes of war, confident, resurgent. As though on the screen of my painting the inchoate mass of the Black City now parted to form a corridor between the two palaces that flank the square. The orange moon that had risen above my fear-ridden vision of New York became the golden basilica of S. Marco to which I now had access. No longer a disc vague as a distant planet, but a haven into which I could enter. It was becoming ever clearer to me that

it was not the pictorial image that I was seeking, but a home for my restless and rebellious soul.

The paintings became larger. The long sequence of windows and arches led me down the Piazza and out to the lagoon where the all-over image is no longer a complex of stone, but of light which often seems more tangible than stone. The architecture of the Piazza served to emphasize and give depth to the light as my pitted surfaces refracted and multiplied it: light as tactile in its nature as the stone brocade of the church.

I lived in a room on the water level of the Grand Canal. When the afternoon sun reflected from the walls across the Canal, I closed the shutters but for a slit to light my painting table, and what lacked of light from without, I added from within by using gold powder. This gold seemed to breathe from within my basilicas, and became for me, as for the medieval mosaicists, a spiritual symbol. The paintings lowered in key until gold became the only light of the painting. The Basilica loomed larger and began to dominate.

I went to Assisi for the first time in 1951. From the Giotto's and the Cimabue's in the Church I gravitated towards the Byzantine crucifix that spoke to S. Francis. In the convent of S. Damiano I began to read the *Fioretti*, the Little Flowers of St. Francis, from which I was never separated for the next eight years which preceded my conversion. The impression of this day, a foretaste of Paradise, became the painting of Assisi with its two churches of S. Rufino and S. Chiara, blooming from the tender mists of the valley of Spoleto.

At Christmas of that year I was again in Assisi. The spontaneity and the passion with which the people celebrated mid-night Mass and the High Mass on Christmas morning moved me profoundly. A stranger drew

me from my solitude and my restlessness and brought me to the Pro-Civitate-Christiana where I was given a greeting of such affection as I was never to forget. Don Giovanni Rossi, founder of the Association, asked me in all simplicity if I was thinking of becoming Catholic.

«I will return», I said to Don Giovanni as I left. But I knew that I was running away from the very truth I sought, from that very salvation whose sign and symbol had arisen in my paintings. That this betrayal of myself, of my own deepest need and desire, might also involve a betrayal of my painting whose disc of gold had, from the beginning, confessed my longing for salvation, did not yet occur to me.

The wounds of childhood and the burden of guilt were not to be healed by painting alone. As my painting matured, I began to use it as a refuge, an arm against the world. My isolation from society, living alone and traveling, permitted and encouraged an equivocal life which in turn intensified my hostility and guilt. My painting, which by now had won the praise of experts and the purchase of collectors, served to justify me to myself and to hide from others my disordered life. The prophetic words of Maritain: "If some moral vice does not chain his heart to dullness, the artist will recognize Love and Beauty", became a storm warning on my horizon. Because I still recognized Beauty, I tried to deny to myself that I was chaining my heart to dullness and that I no longer recognized Love.

Because I would not accept the liberation I really sought, and which I knew had been offered me, I would simulate it, play it out in my paintings. I felt liberated and saved by my paintings as the drowning man is saved by the life-preserver. In a sense I lived from

painting to painting, each done in great rapidity and intensity. I began to see in each painting a respite, a stay against the eventual death sentence which society would impose on my immortality.

I relied more and more on the spontaneous inspiration, on sensibility that seized the image as from the wind of our rapidly changing world. I took stimulants to excite both my sensibility and my sin, and consequently, the urgency for liberation. Each painting was a reenactment of a life and death struggle in the arena of myself, until I began to be a myth to myself, to impose on the world in the eventual failure of my art.

My romanticism exacted new and stranger sensations. "To understand this beauty, relative and multiple, forged by passions and proposed by romantics", said Baudelaire, "one must travel", "Il faut voyager". As though assailed by a cosmic urge to embrace the whole earth in one monumental image, I traveled rapidly and constantly, seeking, in the redemptive symbols of others, substitutes for my own salvation. In India, my symbol was the enormous alabaster tomb of the Taj Mahal, candid and pure, while from the sky vultures dove on the cadavers of dogs that floated in the Jumna River below. In Greece, the golden Parthenon reassured me of Eternity, in the confusion of centuries of changing thought and life. In Egypt, the Pyramids spread vast triangles of refreshment and consolation against the fire of the desert. In Istanbul, the golden dome of S. Sophia maternally nourished the black frenetic city.

In 1955 I went to Santorini, island of destruction in the Aegean Sea, it too an arena of a life and death struggle. Earthquakes beneath the sea over a period of centuries had exploded away half of the island. The

death of Santorini had been redeemed by the Apocalyptic vision of St. John who, it is often thought, saw the explosion from Patmos. In similar manner, I hoped that my painting would redeem my own death, or rather, the moral decay that had made me a stranger not only to society but to myself as well. I lived and painted in the destroyed section of the island, in the cliff that looked down into the volcano which spread like a burnt liver on the sea in the vast embrace of the crater. The image of my salvation which had once been the radiant basilica of San Marco now became the black core of a volcano.

From Santorini I went to the desert of the Sahara whose infinite emptiness, like Buddhist annihilation, I found it easy to fill with myself. By now, even the vast horizons of the Sahara held no mystery for me, but were confining. Only the holocaust of blizzards of sand consoled me: burnt offering to my own passions.

The dust of the desert became the fog of autumn Venice where I returned in 1957 in hopes of recapturing the vigor of my paintings of 1952. But this fog, instead of embracing me in a closer communion with the mysterious beauties of dying Venice, merely veiled them from me. The Piazza I saw now with the eye of the tourist who in passing merely sees an object, and forgets. Still, Baudelaire's words "one works if not from inclination, then from desperation", consoled me. I painted with but the residue of myself that sin had left me and had not yet consumed. I use the word *sin* because I knew that my life, my immoral life, was a game, a deceit. I also knew that my painting would no longer sustain me, that I was already falling back exhausted like someone swimming against the current.

In 1959 I went to the vast ruins of Angkor Wat, in Cambodia. These ruins had always represented to me

the supreme goal of romantic voyages, which surely would not fail to rekindle the dying spark of my painting. But it was to take a breath other than that of the draughty bat-sodden corridors of Angkor to resurrect me. In the temples' suffocation, in the hot forest, in the endless profiles of Buddha, swollen, sensual and tottering beneath the embrace of the jungle, I saw paraded before me only the image of my own death.

I returned to my studio in Italy. In my spirit there was no image; I had no will, not even the desperation to paint.

The first revelation which was my painting already bore the seed of my second revelation which was my conversion. In other words, the moon or the disc of gold which had risen above my Black City in 1949 as a sign of yearning for a spiritual haven, had become the church. In my disc of gold shone the church. I now plunged into it.

I went back to Assisi. It had been eight years since I said to Don Giovanni, «I will return». For five days I came to the door of the Pro-Civitate-Christiana without entering. Each time I went away again. But the need for safety and for freedom was greater than my last energy for sin; and on August 15, I entered. I tremblingly waited for Don Giovanni who, with hundreds of visitors, had gone to celebrate Mass in the forest that surrounds St. Francis' Hermitage on the mountain above Assisi.

When Don Giovanni returned I waited until he had gone to his office, and then I rushed in and fell weeping into his arms. I told him that I could no longer live as I had been living, and I begged him to take me and convert me to the Church.

I was converted on August 29, 1959, the day on which the Church celebrates the decapitation of St. John the

Baptist. I wanted to decapitate my own head of my carnal self, and to be reborn in Spirit. By the human calendar, I was 47 years old. By the Lord's, I was just born.

As a child abandons itself to the mother, I wanted only to be absorbed into the love of Christ and of His Church, to be nourished by its Sacraments, and to grow to fullness of life in the Grace of God.

I had in childhood been made to feel guilty when I was without sin. There had been no absolution even for imaginary sins. And yet now that I had really sinned, I was suddenly, in the forgiveness of Christ, without guilt. I wrote to my parents: "For the first time in my life I am not alone. I have no age, no sin. I am not afraid of time. I need answer to no man nor gain any thing on this earth. I have no responsibility other than to grow to love Christ, to know God as He wants me to, in paint or however, as He loves me. And to die in Him, to live forever".

I had no more need to travel. The search for myself in things and places had only increased my restlessness and my unreality. I had now embarked on an eternal voyage of the Spirit, towards that only destination of all of us, which is God. I set out on this voyage by stopping permanently in Assisi, in July 1960.

From the solitary hell I had made of the freedom which God had given me in order to paint, I entered, not as a member but let us say as a participant, in the lay community of the Pro-Civitate-Christiana.

I was now to begin a long awakening to human relationship in Christ. I mean by this that in the Christian community all are one body, in and of Christ. Each strives to live not for himself at the expense of others as happens in the worldly community, but to live and direct his efforts towards the good of all, even if this good

involves the sacrifice of his own immediate interests. And so one loves, not exclusively according to his own inclinations and sentiments, but each and all indiscriminately with the very love Christ which sacrifices itself for the joy and the good of others.

No human ideal can make such love possible. It is the love of our Lord operating in us, Christ's loving through each of us our brothers as He loved his own. This love is generated by prayer, by our nourishment in the Eucharist; as branches are nourished by the vine. It is the Grace of the Lord that holds such a community together, that generates it to a new and not merely collective, but superhuman energy. Superhuman because supernatural. To the degree that the members of such a community surrender their carnal egotistical selves to Christ's love, they are transformed in Christ, and Christ operates in them.

The birth of the new man in each of us takes time. My own egotism, accustomed to and rooted in all manner of deceit and strategies for its own satisfactions, often rebelled, as all sinners rebel at sanctity, at the constancy and the calm of this community where each gives, whatever the cost to himself, and never asks, but simply and unquestioningly gives. The more I asked of attention, time, advice and affection, the more was given me. But given so spontaneously and so completely that I soon began to understand that the purest joy of my new friends was simply in giving; giving of themselves (things they cannot give, having nothing, being promised before God to poverty).

I also began to understand that the *gift* was not given to me personally to satisfy the egotism with which I often asked it, but it was given as though to God through me, or in me. One could say that it was

God giving through them to me, and thus, in conquest of love, embracing me ever closer in His community. Until I soon began to be liberated from my old desires and egotism just to the degree that I too similarly gave of myself to them.

Love, which I had hitherto bent to my pleasure and my advantage, to the point of destroying not only my painting but myself, now began to be transformed into love for my brothers of the Pro-Civitate-Christiana.

If I now say that the Lord, knowing my need for an individual, a particular affection, granted me the Grace of true friendship, I express it in this way because in the religious community God is the agent and the destination of every thought and act. Each life is dedicated to and inserted in God. The friend which the Lord gave me, then, was no longer, as in the past, to be an instrument of my sensuality, but the means of loving all men, of loving God. This was possible because Christ, operating in my friend, absorbed and directed my love beyond the creature level of human attachment to Himself, to His love for all. In this supernaturalized love, I also discovered the freedom of chastity, and, in my friend's selfless devotion, the strength that it gives to the human heart.

Emptied of all will and vision in what I can only call my death in 1959, I had no more desire to paint. Yet if painting was truly the expression which the Lord desired of me, rather than denying my painting, would not conversion, in the freedom of my rebirth in Christ, restore it? And in a purer and nobler form?

The constant presence and encouragement of this friend led me towards painting again. The same human sentiment which, by seeking only its own satisfaction, had sought the destruction of others and had

destroyed my painting, now, transformed and spiritualized in conversion as an offering to God, became the means by which He recalled me to my vocation.

I took a small house in Assisi, 600 years old, in an olive and fig orchard, close to the Pro-Civitate-Christiana. I broke down a wall in the attic, enlarged its only window, and opened a sky-light in the roof.

My painting, which had always bent and seized the last light of the day to my own image as though to possess it for myself, now opened, as did my life, to a new beginning. No longer a defensive mechanism to stay the flooding tide of night, but a calm giving with the morning light that grows to fullness of day.

The joy and the peace gained through daily Mass and Communion with Christ released me from tension, and His love, which transcended my own limited and carnal sentiments, led me to a freedom in which I was constantly renewed in body and in spirit.

To the degree that Christ had saved my life from shipwreck and was now my truth, His figure began to prevail over every other source of inspiration; and to become all of the landscapes and the temples of other faith that I had painted, and the inevitable means of proclaiming my reconquered liberty and my salvation.

Except for the *Crucifix 2* the new paintings did not come to me until a year after conversion. They came without the obsessive accompaniments of stimulants and a disordered life by which I had bent my painting to serve my egotism. The dark and crusted areas into which I suspect I hid much self-love and self-pity now opened to the light. And I emerged from the suffocation of self and sensuality which had confined my vision to the negative cause of merely delaying my collapse. I began to paint from love rather than from my senses.

I don't presume to compare the spirituality of my earlier to that of my recent paintings. The limpidity of eye reacquired after conversion may not be greater than that which generated the early *Piazzas* of 1950. But I believe that as the man, so the artist whose life is now inserted into the Christian mystery of redemption should function on a higher level; and that the eye of the artist will be purer, more spiritual. Surely the more limpid the artist's eye the more all things reveal their ultimate depth, their intimate truth, where every moment is new and fraught with the wonder of an overshadowing Presence. Limpidity of eye is humility and love, where God may enter and trace in our hearts and on the canvas, the forms, the colors of His eternal kingdom of Love.

But there are dangers for the converted artist. He will be tempted to mistake or assume the "religious subject" to which he is now attracted, for his own direct experience. And it is this direct experience, regardless of subject matter, which can be the only true subject of a work of art. The new convictions which now occupy him must be so intimately experienced that they become the very impulse of the work itself; otherwise they will tend to "prey upon his art as substitutes for insufficiently deep experience and creative intuition".¹ The converted artist may also be invited to "confirm by his painting the newly acquired identity with his fellow-believers, substituting this easy communication for that communion more dearly paid, that solitary poetic intuition which art alone can provide"². As I write

1 - Maritain: *Responsibility of the Artist*, New York, Scribner's, 1960.

2 - *Ibid.*

this, I am thinking of those, particularly in religious circles, who would attempt to use the converted artist for a programmed “religious art” or “propaganda”.

Conversion and its consequent moral purification is no guarantee, then, of this «functioning on a higher level». The highest moral virtues can never make up for the lack of, or the mediocrity of the virtue of art or the artistic insight. “Art is concerned with the good of the work, not with the good of man. The responsibility of the artist is towards his work”.⁹ My conversion did restore in me an equilibrium which permitted me to paint again, and I believe that it put me in a position to use my art in a purer and freer manner. Conversion reinstated me as an artist, not of any particular kind, religious or secular, but simply as the artist the Lord intended me to be. Whether I now paint the figure of Christ or a landscape is of course no measure of my “religiousness”. This, in fact, will depend solely on how I respond to the artist’s responsibility to be himself.

To the degree that I am possessed of the love of Christ, and therefore of His having called me through conversion to share in His work of the redemption of man, I can only see my painting as an instrument of this redemption. To the degree that I will insert my life in Christ, He will operate through me, and my painting—or I could say His painting through me— will contribute to a new and true Christian art.

Only a collective vision will again produce a great collective art such as that of the French Cathedrals and the Mosaics of Ravenna. The artisan-sculptors of the Middle Ages were assimilated into a religious attitude

of the people so authentic that great art simply grew beneath their chisels as a plant in fertile soil. It was the artist who, with his instruments, sculpted not only the Cathedral but carved and forged the community. At Monreale, man participated through the artist and the Pancreator in an immense and sacred mystery; he believed in and with Him.

The collective mould was broken at the Renaissance and the individual ego emerged, liberated from the community. For six hundred years since Giotto, man, natural and secular as opposed to spiritual, has been taking over art, concentrating on images of the external world that tended to demonstrate his supremacy over it.

The non-objective so-called abstract movement of today is art’s first and total revolution to restore man to his interior life. The interiority of all research today coincides with and invites the stripping away of external appearance in order to make immediately available the interior realities. Rejoined to the great Byzantine and Romanesque traditions, this movement would be a purification, a respiritualization of art. Lacking the collective faith of these traditions, however, this vital movement already risks becoming an end in itself and dying.

We live in an age that does not believe, or thinks that it does not believe. Lacking faith, yet driven to believe in something, man invents subterfuges which barricade him within the limits of himself. Denying God, he searches for substitutes until, in a certain sense, he simply substitutes himself for God. Man thus becomes the measure of man, a law unto himself; and in his thirst for the ultimate and eternal, his limitation becomes his absolute. The very antidote to centuries

of decadence initiated by the self-worshiping individuality of the Renaissance now threatens to re-enthroned the artist-individual in a splendid but fatal isolation.

What the artist today lacks of collective identity is compensated by the individual intensity of his solitude. Where collectivity implied discipline, the isolated artist is left to impose his own. The temptations to take advantage of this autonomy, however, and to maneuver a rapid but superficial success through novelty, sensation, and the occult, are often too strong for any but the very real artists to resist.

The modern artist is constrained to speak in a language which he knows may not be understood by those with whom he shares the life of his epoch. He is forced into a private vernacular that is introspective and “non-functional”. He cannot speak in the familiar terms of the people as could the artisan-sculptors of the Middle Ages without lowering himself to the present level of the masses. Which is profane and materialistic. The sentimental figurines of sacred persons that have profaned our churches for the last few hundred years are examples of what the public expects of the artist of sacred subjects.

Deprived of a common language, the contemporary artist is forced to search for his own in depths beneath the conscious level of the people, and he often comes up with forms hitherto dormant, atavistic, and subconscious which the masses cannot immediately, and usually are reluctant to recognize. If he is a true artist, however, and if his spirit embraces the spirit of his time, the forms he discovers will reveal the secret depths of the people. And the artist alone, responsible for the revelation of his art, must bear the burden of his race on his shoulders until it catches up with him,

confesses, and is willing to move on to new frontiers. Meanwhile through all the true artists, however isolated they may be in their own solitudes, will run a vital and subtle lymph, perhaps imperceptible, which will become a single idea, a style, a faith.

The comprehensibility of art has become a point of academic discussion. If the painter's image is rooted in the common terrain, and if he is sincere and generous, he need not worry if his image is not recognized. Even if the people do not understand it at once (and why should they expect to, when the task of art is to explore and reveal spiritual depths hitherto unsuspected?), they will eventually be compelled to recognize it, for his image will be the representative image of all.

When people talk of understanding a work of art, they often mean simply recognizing the subject with the “outer” eye. But the true painter has not painted with his outer, his natural and passive eye. The subject which he has seen has been transformed into image by his inner, his spiritual and active eye. And he paints for no other reason than to discover this image imprinted on his soul; so that when it appears on the canvas it is not so much an image of the subject as it is an image of himself. It is, then, essentially himself that the artist paints in order to discover himself. And if the artist has truly lived in the spiritual terms of his people, then they may discover themselves in him, in the image of himself, which includes them, that has arisen from his visual contacts. His art, then, will be important in so far as he reveals to others not their superficial, sentimental or material selves, but their profound and spiritual selves. The artist will be great to the degree that he makes available to the greatest number, this sense of eternity. The only true understanding of an art consists

in this recognition on the part of the people, of their eternal reality.

Understanding an art, then, implies sharing the artist's transformation of the subject of the natural eye into the image of the spiritual eye. And until the observer's inner eye is engaged by a work of art he will remain on the superficial level of appearance, merely seeing the work but not at all understanding it. This is particularly true in the case of religious art. Someone who does not try to see beyond the mere outward representation of Christ in a painting, will have no more than a sentimental experience. But to the Christian, to the artist who shares the Christian vision, Christ is a reality far beyond the sentimental, just as a painting that depicts Christ, if it is a true work of art, is beyond sentimentality. Rouault's paintings of the Christian mystery are not "representation"; they are "prophecies". In an agreement of nature with the supernatural subject which the artist would represent, in a kind of likeness or "connaturality" that leaps beyond the actual media of communication, Rouault's paintings of Christ "reveal". And so it may be said that one cannot really understand Rouault's Christ without a sympathetic meditation, more than sympathetic: a compassionate and profound meditation on the Christian mystery.

The true language of the people, whether or not it is consciously recognized, will be that of common and profound aspirations. It will be that language which is yet to be revealed to them. In a similar way we are often closest to God, not when we think or feel that we are close to Him, but simply in our desiring to be totally available to Him.

We must suffer and sacrifice much, indeed we must be willing to sacrifice *all*, in order to truly live the

Christian mystery. This simplest all-embracing Truth must pass through many levels of our understanding before we can even vaguely sense its ultimate price and meaning.

Art is one of the purest means of discovering this Truth of the mystery of God in us. ■

Assisi, 26 June 1961