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Abstract

Written by Titus Burckhardt, *Sacred Art in East and West: Its Principles and Methods* is a monumental work that addresses the philosophy of art of the Traditionalist (Perennialist) school from a comparative perspective. Burckhardt opposes the modernist view that regards art as an aesthetic “game,” and argues that art is a form of divine “knowledge” and a means for the spiritual cultivation of the human being. According to the author, for an art to be considered “sacred,” it is not sufficient merely to deal with a religious subject; the formal language employed must also arise from a spiritual source and be based on objective principles. The work analyzes in depth cosmic symbolism in Hindu temple architecture, the “Incarnation of the Word” and iconography in Christian art, abstraction based on the principle of *Tawhīd* in Islamic art, the concept of “emptiness” in Buddhist art, and Far Eastern landscape painting. In the final section, the author describes the tendency toward “naturalism” that began with the Renaissance as a spiritual decline, and states that genuine artistic renewal is possible only through the rediscovery of traditional principles, thus presenting a map of meaning concerning the question of why art is created.

Keywords: Titus Burckhardt, Art, Sacred Art, East, West.

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General Information about the Author and the Book

Titus Burckhardt (1908–1984) was one of the most important Traditionalist (Perennialist) thinkers of the twentieth century. Born into a Swiss family of art historians, Burckhardt devoted his life to understanding the traditional arts, metaphysics, and cosmology of both the East and the West. He is regarded as one of the most competent figures to convey the spiritual depth of Islamic art to the Western world through an academic and intellectual language. Standing in the same intellectual lineage (*Sophia Perennis*) as René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon, the author opposed the modernist tendency to reduce art to an aesthetic “game” and defended the view that art is a form of divine “knowledge.” Written by Titus Burckhardt and translated into Turkish by Tahir Uluç, *Doğu’da ve Batı’da Kutsal Sanat* is a monumental work that examines the metaphysical foundations, symbolism, and technical methods of traditional art from a comparative perspective. As one of the leading representatives of the Traditionalist school (Perennialism), Burckhardt repositions art beyond the narrow confines of modern aesthetic perception, presenting it as a reflection of divine truths on earth and as a means for the spiritual formation of the human being. The work is intended for art historians, theologians, architects, and intellectually engaged readers interested in traditional thought. Burckhardt wrote this work as a critique of art historians who use the term “sacred” for any work that merely addresses religious subjects. According to the author, for an art to be considered sacred, not only its subject matter but also the formal language it employs must emanate from a spiritual source. The target audience of the book consists of academics, artists, and readers interested in the traditional worldview who seek to understand the metaphysical foundations of art. The central argument of the book is that sacred art constitutes a “science of forms” (*the science of images/forms*). Every form serves as a vehicle for a particular quality of being, and a spiritual vision necessarily embodies itself in a distinctive formal language. The book consists of an Introduction and seven main chapters:

- Chapter One: The Formation of the Hindu Temple
- Chapter Two: The Foundations of Christian Art
- Chapter Three: “I Am the Door”
- Chapter Four: The Foundations of Islamic Art
- Chapter Five: The Representation of the Buddha
- Chapter Six: Landscape in Far Eastern Art
- Chapter Seven: The Decline and Renewal of Christian Art

1. Introduction: The Nature of Sacred Art and Modern Critique

In the introductory chapter of the work, Burckhardt sharply criticizes the reductionist approaches of modern art historians toward the term “sacred.” According to the author, the mere fact that a work of art deals with a religious subject is not sufficient to render it “sacred.” Sacred art must derive from spiritual truths not only in its subject matter but also in the formal language through which that subject is expressed. Religious artworks produced during the Renaissance and Baroque periods, although they depict religious figures, are not truly sacred, since they shift formally toward “naturalism” and become detached from a spiritual vision. The author emphasizes that sacred art is not the product of individual creativity or “genius,” but rather is grounded in objective rules and universal symbols. Sacred art is a symbol that aims not to stimulate personal emotions, but to free the soul from the chaos and transient “facts” of the world and direct it toward the divine center. In this context, every form functions as a vehicle for a particular quality of being, and there exists an ontological unity between form and meaning.

2. The Formation of the Hindu Temple: The Architecture of the Cosmos

The first main chapter of the work is devoted to the metaphysical foundations of temple architecture in the Hindu tradition. Burckhardt defines the construction of the temple as an “expression of cosmology.” The temple is a center where earth and heaven meet, a miniature model of the cosmos. The *Vāstu-Puruṣa-maṇḍala*, which forms the basis of the temple plan, lies at the heart of this cosmic symbolism. The square and circular forms on the mandala represent a metaphysical opposition and harmony: the circle symbolizes the limitless and the “celestial,” while the square signifies the earthly realm and the established order. The Hindu temple is the translation of the continuous movement of the universe into a permanent form. The author states that every stage of temple construction is grounded in a divine sacrificial rite (the sacrifice of Prajāpati), and that the artist undergoes an alchemical transformation of the self in the course of this process. Furthermore, the inseparable relationship between the static structure of architecture and the rhythmic movement of sacred dance (the dance of Śiva) explains the dynamic character of Hindu art.

3. The Foundations of Christian Art: The Icon and the Cathedral, and “I Am the Door”

In the chapters devoted to Christian art, Burckhardt offers an in-depth analysis of how the doctrine of the “Incarnation of the Word” shapes artistic expression. The Christian sanctuary is symbolically identified with the body of Christ; the plan of

the church is likened to the form of the crucified Christ. Burckhardt explains the theological significance of icons through the concept of *vera icon* ("true icon"). Icons are not merely artistic representations, but reflections of the sacred within the sensory world, and they require spiritual discipline. The geometric proportions found in medieval cathedral architecture are part of the legacy of Pythagorean and Roman architectural schools, allowing the sacred structure to congeal like a "crystallized universe." Particularly in Gothic cathedrals, the art of stained glass represents the culmination of identifying light with divine knowledge; the colored light filtering through the windows symbolizes the transformative power of Grace upon the soul. In the section titled "I Am the Door," the symbolism of church portals is examined. The portal is a threshold that carries the believer from the worldly realm into the Kingdom of God. Christ's statement "I am the door" (John 10:9) is embodied in architectural form, and the images on the portal summarize this spiritual passage.

4. The Foundations of Islamic Art: *Tawhīd* and Abstraction

In the section devoted to Islamic art, Burckhardt places the principle of *Tawhīd* (Unity) at the center of his analysis. Islam's prohibition of figural representation aims to prevent created forms from being confused with divine truth. This orientation directed Islamic art toward calligraphy, arabesque, and geometric ornamentation. Mosque architecture constitutes a space of emptiness and balance that assists the soul in shedding the multiplicity of things and attaining divine serenity. The author notes that the dome of the mosque symbolizes the universal spirit, while the minarets represent the principle of *Tawhīd* rising toward the heavens. Furthermore, Islam's character as a "religion of *fiṭra*" is also reflected in the art of traditional clothing; male garments such as the turban and caftan possess the quality of "sacred attire," affirming humanity's spiritual dignity on earth and its role as vicegerent. *Husn al-khaṭṭ* (Islamic calligraphy) takes the place of the icon in the Islamic world, representing the visible embodiment of the divine Word as the visualized form of the Qur'an.

5. The Far East: The Representation of the Buddha and Landscape Art

Burckhardt views the representation of the Buddha as an alchemical transformation that emerges from Hindu art yet "crystallizes" it. The body of the Buddha and the lotus upon which he sits symbolize the profound serenity of the awakened soul and a universal seal. The hand gestures (*mudrās*) in these representations reflect different spiritual states and cosmic rhythms. In Far Eastern landscape painting, the influence of Taoism and Zen Buddhism is clearly evident. The landscape serves as a means of participation in the divine unity of nature. The most essential element in this pictorial art is the concept of

“emptiness” (*śūnyā*); emptiness represents the transcendent Essence that is the source of all beings. Landscape painting aims to liberate the human mind from individual limitations and lead it toward a state of universal serenity.

6. The Modern Period: Decline and Renewal

The final chapter of the work is devoted to the decline of Christian art that began with the Renaissance and to the artistic crisis of the modern world. According to Burckhardt, the Renaissance marks the period in which art became detached from its spiritual context and was confined to individualism and an artificial reality imposed by mathematical perspective. During this era, art lost its metaphysical depth and evolved into a form of naturalism that appealed solely to emotions. The author argues that the artistic crisis of the modern period is a consequence of humanity's loss of its own “center” (God). Genuine artistic renewal is possible only through the rediscovery of traditional symbols and principles. Sacred art possesses the potential to reconnect human beings to the eternal and the timeless in opposition to the fragmented perception of the modern world.

Conclusion and Academic Evaluation

Sacred Art in East and West is a comprehensive work that demonstrates that art is not merely a matter of “form,” but rather a gateway to the deepest layers of being. By examining five major religious traditions from a comparative perspective, Burckhardt reveals the universal principles that lie behind diverse artistic forms. For art historians, this work offers not merely a chronology, but a map of meaning. For theologians, it reveals the aesthetic manifestations of sacred texts; for architects and artists, it illuminates the philosophical background of traditional methods. This masterpiece by Titus Burckhardt continues to hold an unshakable place in academic literature as one of the most powerful responses offered by traditional wisdom to the aesthetic crisis of the modern world. Inviting the reader beyond the superficial, this study stands as a fundamental reference for any researcher seeking to understand not what art is, but why it is.