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The Role of the Symbol in Art

BY

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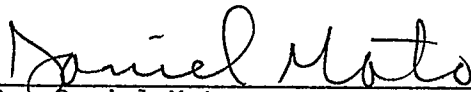
THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES.

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## ABSTRACT

This exhibition and accompanying study offers a consideration of the role of symbolism in art forms. The ritual of the gallery showing and the representations that occur are examples of a particular cultural, that is, societal and psychological environment. The images represent particular categories of classification, in a particular contemporary space and time. They are, above all, culturally bound and constructed.

Included is an examination of various theories of culture and the evaluative elements which are expressed through the use of symbols. The symbol, the portal, is examined specifically, referring to the Beth Alpha Mosaic and its uses in religious ritual.

Nature as a symbol, as a manifestation of change, is also discussed. The Symbolist Movement with its search for meaning in the inner self, and contemporary artists who combine nature images with cultural forms, connect this exhibition to its art-historical past and expresses the belief that a line of descent exists in the use by artists of symbols and symbol systems to express the values and beliefs important to the particular cultural group to which they belong.

The accompanying exhibition is the physical realization of a metaphorical alignment of two symbolic systems, the classificatory

polarities of 'maleness' and 'femaleness' and the subsidiary forms of the 'house'/'garden' and their analogical structures such as levels/terraces, rooms/plots, closets/niches and portals/gateways and passageways.

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## CONTENTS

	PAGE
ABSTRACT . . .	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS . . .	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS . . .	vi
LIST OF PLATES . . .	vii
CHAPTER I - Introduction . . .	1
A. The Symbol as Cultural Determinant . . .	8
1. "Nature" as a Symbol . . .	14
CHAPTER II - The Role of the Symbol in Art . . .	20
A. The Portal as Primary Symbol . . .	21
B. The Beth Alpha Mosaic . . .	24
C. The Symbolist Movement . . .	
CHAPTER III - The Exhibition . . .	46
A. Description of the Work . . .	54
CHAPTER IV - Conclusion . . .	63
APPENDIX	66
BIBLIOGRAPHY	67

## LIST OF PLATES

	PAGE
Plate I . . .	4
Plate II . . .	7
Plate III . . .	25
PLATE IV . . .	39
PLATE V . . .	56



## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Every society has a fund of shared knowledge, a communication system in which ideas about customs and beliefs, politics, and economics are understood. These ideas can be overt or hidden, but appear in language in the form of assimilated knowledge or metaphor. Robert Nisbet (1969: 5-6) gives this definition of metaphor:

. . . Metaphor is our means of effecting instantaneous fusion of two separated realms of experience into one illuminating, iconic encapsulating image . . . .

. . . Metaphor is, at its simplest, a way of proceeding from the known to the unknown. It is a way of cognition in which the identifying qualities of one thing are transferred in an instantaneous, almost unconscious, flash or insight to some other thing that is, by remoteness or complexity, unknown to us.<sup>1</sup>

An artist attempts to make a viewer, reader, listener or participant conscious of his inward world and visions through

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<sup>1</sup>These quotes are from Robert Nisbet's book Social Change and History: Aspects of the Western Theory of Development (1969: 5-6) in which he presents examples of philosophical systems rooted in metaphorical statement, like Freud's Oedipus complex, and defense mechanisms. He cites the historical likening of the universe to an organism and, in the 17th century, to a machine, and says these historical metaphors affected the teaching and practice of physical science, moral philosophy and human psychology.

the experience of his art. Content or meaning, the message the artist is communicating and expressing in the work of art, originates in the artist's imagination from the manipulation of hypothetical situations and the resulting communication in some symbolic form like writing and art making. The particular form and means chosen to express this message is known as style. A metaphor, the coming together of some image or word into a recognizable symbol, is the structural framework through which the artist recreates his message, and in the recreating of it allows for the viewer's participation and understanding. In Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors (1974: 25) Victor Turner says of metaphor:

It is likely that scientists and artists both think primordially in such images: metaphor may be the form of what M. Polanyi calls "tacit knowledge."<sup>2</sup>

This exhibition takes the physical form of a house/garden model or walled space (80' x 28'). Its east/west architectural form has a north central doorway and passage leading into the main ground floor space. There are rooms/plots and closets/niches developing off the main ground floor space. At the eastern and western ends are second storey or raised terraces. One can

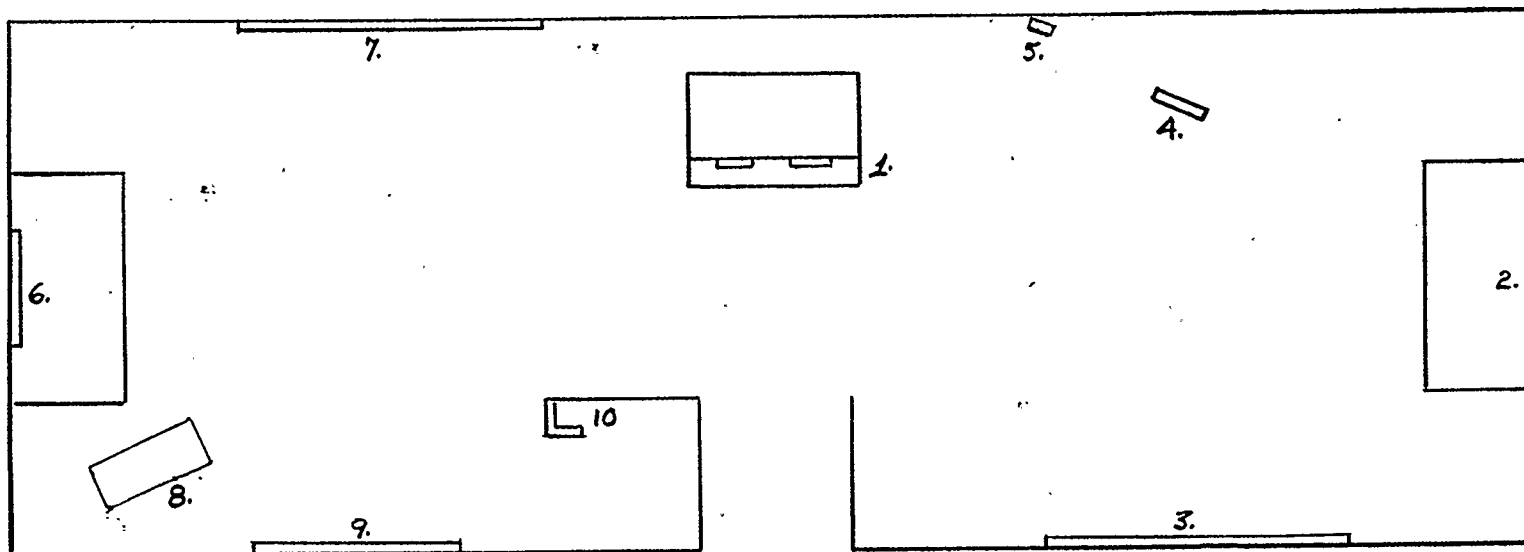
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<sup>2</sup>In The Study of Man, philosopher Michael Polanyi speaks of man's abilities to think as his most outstanding attribute and of there being two kinds of knowledge, explicit and tacit. The former is described as being of the written or mathematical kind, a formulated type, while the latter is the subjective, creative reorganization and comprehending of parts of explicit knowledge into some sort of unique, to the individual, whole (Polanyi 1958: 11-39).

be entered through a narrow doorway, the other is open and unimpeded. Imagery and forms found within the exhibition describe, or are derivative of, the primal symbolic form of the portal and its expanded forms like the niche, arch, passageway, or entrance portal, scenery, background "scenery" in the form of painted canvas, and free-standing sculptural forms.

Together the house/garden model and the resident anthropomorphic forms and images become a metaphorical statement (Plate I).

In this installation, the basic analogical device or root metaphor is the dual classificatory system of maleness and femaleness expressed in my specifically chosen images. Under these two categories are the subsidiary forms and images of house/garden and their structural characteristics of levels/terraces, rooms/plots, and entrances, arranged according to my interpretation of male and female organization of space. The "garden" model metaphor should be viewed as an expanded form of "house" model. Just as an archway, niche and canopy are the expanded forms of a portal, so the walled garden and its terraces, passages, entrances and plots, is an analogue of the house. Indeed, the walled garden can be viewed as a continuation of the living area of a house as it is a focus for activities pertaining to sustenance and other social activities. It is certainly a specially set-apart space within the gallery. Within this context I believe that there are connections between divisions of space, as found



- |                                   |                  |
|-----------------------------------|------------------|
| 1. LOVE IN A MIST/DEVIL IN A BUSH | 6. FLORA BUNDA   |
| 2. RUTA BAGA                      | 7. SCARLETRUNNER |
| 3. TRUMPET CREEPER                | 8. WORK-BENCH    |
| 4. GOATS BEARD                    | 9. FLAMBOYANT    |
| 5. LADDER                         | 10. NICHE        |

GRADUATION EXHIBITION  
INSTALLATION  
PLAN VIEW

By V. ROBERTSON  
SCALE 1" = 1' SEPT. '86

within this model, and social formations such as a symbolic classificatory system. That is, just as language, word symbols, and art works are mediums for expressing thought, environments or spacial settings are also indicators of a particular cultural system. Man has necessarily shaped and bound his spacial settings according to his biological and social needs, and indeed, E. Goffman in Gender Advertisements suggests that space, once it has been shaped and organized, reflects social organization (1979: 1). Shirley Ardener (1979: 12-13) agrees:

. . . social identity is partly determined by "the physical and spatial constituents of the group's environment" (Judy Mathews, 1980, p. 4), that is to say: space defines the people in it. At the same time, . . . the presence of individuals in space in turn determines its nature . . . . Thus: people define space.

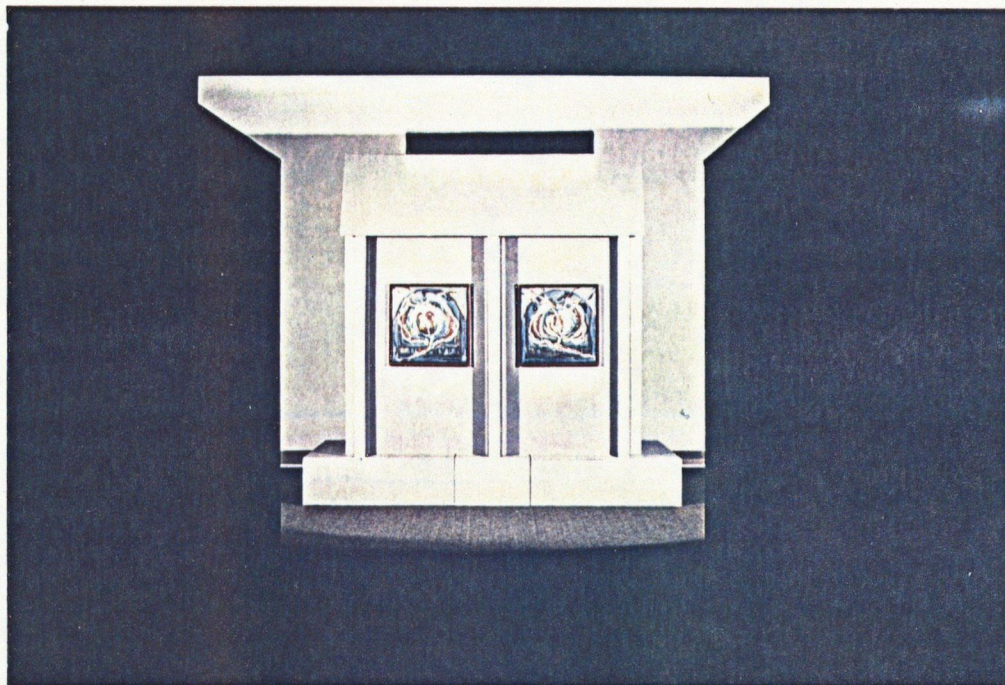
Thus boundaries of a physical nature (such as doorways, rooms, levels) and social nature (defined as maleness and femaleness) are present in all societies. The symbolic act of the bridegroom carrying his bride over the threshold and through the doorway, expresses not only the everyday act of entering a house, but of the new beginnings of statuses of male and female within the marriage (Douglas 1966: 114). Within this exhibition the associations which the viewers make or ascribe to the juxtaposition of these two systems of things will depend upon the literalness, the familiarity of the images and their combinations, and the supporting social values of the viewers.

As stated above, the use of symbols to distinguish one class of things from another implies the creation of a boundary. The exhibition itself contains a boundary of social space from the centre of the exhibition floor to the centre of the construction Love-in-a-Mist/Devil-in-a-Bush, implying a transition from maleness to femaleness and the ambiguous nature of the frontier or boundary where they meet (Plate II). Edmund Leach (1976: 35) calls this ambiguous or boundary area a "sacred, taboo zone."<sup>3</sup> The portal, here and in other parts of the exhibition, symbolizes transition, crossing from one place or state to another, and the threshold or boundary experienced physically and symbolically within this particular space. The botanical or anthropomorphic images serve as manifestations of growth and change, as symbols of transformation. Historically plant symbolism has been imbued with conceptions of "being" and "becoming." This makes the imagery ideal in the context of this installation, for the installation model directs the viewer from the boundary line of the central painting Love-in-a-Mist/Devil-in-a-Bush to either end. Maleness meets femaleness with a change and/or ambivalence occurring at the central

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<sup>3</sup>Edmund Leach feels that when we impose "boundaries" between things, such as a change of status from unmarried to married, the action of switching requires some sort of ceremony or ritual. During the ritual a "no man's time" or time and space of special value occurs which makes it a "sacred" or "taboo" time (Leach 1976: 34-35).





Love-in-a-Mist/Devil-in-a-Bush

Painting by Valerie Robertson, 1986

boundary. A mixing and merging of attributes occurs at the centre.

#### A. The Symbol as Cultural Determinant

There is no one single theory of culture, but Leslie White in his essay "Man and Culture" explains it this way (1959: 139-140). "Culture" is composed of four categories: ideological, sociological, sentimental and technological. The ideological component comprises man's beliefs which are dependent upon symbols and speech for their perpetuation. Religious philosophies are all dependent upon symbols. The sociological category which includes the rules and regulations and patterns of behavior are expressed through verbal expression, or symbols. White says sentiment or attitudes are subjective feelings and so are given form by man's ability to symbol. Even technological culture, being a progressive and accumulative process in man where one group takes over where another leaves off, he says, is accomplished through the use of symbols.

Edmund Leach (1976: 45-96) describes all forms of customary human behavior as communication events, for example: biological activities such as breathing, technical activities which alter the state of the outside world (like digging a hole), and expressive activities like gestures and verbal utterances. The expressive actions operate as signals, signs and symbols, and so include painting, writing, acting, and worshipping. Leach says



these expressive actions are not done only for the "audiences," but also for the sake of the "communicator" (art-maker), a form of "collective message to ourselves."

Victor Turner (1976: 19), describes symbols as "objects activities, relationships, events, gestures and spatial units in a ritual situation." He defines "ritual" (1976: 96) as:

. . . prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings or "powers" . . . and "the symbol" as "the smallest unit of ritual which retains the specific properties of ritual behavior."

It follows from all of the above, that the interpretation of a cultural symbol can convey information to us about a society's values and customs.

Universal features of human psychology seem to account for the few symbols of any complexity common to various different groups. William Lessa and E. Vogt (1979: 91) believe:

. . . there does seem to be a dimension of psychological appropriateness that restricts the theoretically infinite range of possible associations between signs and meanings.

Turner (1967: 37) believes there does not seem to be a single correct theory. He says (1967: 37), universal human drives such as the need for food, shelter, and procreation, opposed by the need for social control, and the belief in the existence of a collective unconscious as the main formative principle in the origination of symbolism, are other psychological theories.

It would seem different theoretical preoccupations produce different interpretations. For example, Turner (1976: 59-69), believes the colors white-red-black are universally associated with physical experiences and of social relationships. White is linked to milk and the mother/child relationship, and semen to the male/female relationship. Red is linked to maternal blood and the mother/child relationship, bloodshed, war, conflict, the obtaining and preparation of food and so the societal division of labor. Black is related to excreta, and so is linked to the death of a society member, earth and rainclouds, and their relationship to group values within the cosmological beliefs. Universal psychobiological experiences seem to make these colors appropriate in these contexts.

Leach (1967: 11-12), describes communication between people as occurring in two ways: by the use of ordinary speech and the written word, and by associational means-specific cultural and personal symbols. The second type (nonverbal) can only be expected to be understood if they are familiar to the audience, that is, have context within that society. He classifies symbols as arbitrarily chosen designations (metaphors) which can be standardized (of which "icons" are a part), and nonce symbols (private, one-of-a-kind as found in dreams, art and poetry). The process of symbolization occurs in individual mental processes, but collective representation such as those in Leach's "communication

events" are derived from the common experiences of a group within a particular environment.<sup>4</sup> Leach believes the symbolic object or action becomes, through mental process, the real substitute for what it represents and can have an impact surpassing that of language. In many societies the symbolic object or action has greatest significance when dealing with basic social and cosmological categories. For example at the root of these beliefs in many societies are assumptions regarding man's associations with nature. In The Foundations of Primitive Thought (1979: 158), C. R. Hallpike describes the Konso of southern Ethiopia:

. . . . Just as dreams and hallucinations are mental experiences which, by their clarity and force, are believed to possess objective reality, so their symbols, in ritual contexts, also possess a clarity and force in the expression of Life and Death which for them is objectively real. They clearly consider their experience of the signification of symbols to be a real force. What they suppose to be the power of symbolism is in fact a projection of the impact these symbols make upon their minds, into the real world.

Symbolic analysis such as that made by Durkheim and Mauss

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<sup>4</sup>Leach describes a "communication event" as any unit of communication having dyadic characteristics such as a sender of a message and a receiver of a message, and the action itself and the product of the action. The sharing of the communicative experiences (of ritual) can be expressed in dimensions of verbal, musical, visual and dance form. The receiver of these various sensory events condenses the information into one combined message (Leach 1976: 11-12).

in Primitive Classification (1903) shows that symbols do not exist in isolation, as merely random names, but belong to categories which can include some things, exclude others, and have particular relationships to one another as well as rules which govern their use and understanding (1903: 7-9). Systems of classification clarify the underlying "order" of the symbols. Their ethnographic research indicated that categories could exist not only in order of hierarchy but in a mode of juxtaposition (especially true of symbolic classification). "Binary oppositions" are examples of contrary signs or symbols which only have meaning because they are contrary, that is, discriminated from each other, (you cannot have "up" without "down," "sacred" without "profane"). A society's myths, ritual and mystical cosmologies are the primary settings for these analogical symbolic classifications.

Comparative studies of classification like those of Durkheim and Mauss, have established that there are numerous "terms and qualities" used by societies and represented by dual symbolic classification (combining opposition and analogy). Rodney Needham (1980: 41-62) says:

. . . A common example is that right is conceived as standing in a certain relation to left, that man stands in a like relation to woman, and that right is thereby associated with man and left with woman. This method of establishing systematic connections, of constructing a classification, can be

extended so as to comprise a range of qualitatively disparate objects and attributes.

Analogy is what connects the terms. In his book Kant's Prolegomena, Paul Carus (1949: 129) quotes Kant on analogy;

. . . such a cognition is one of analogy  
 . . . an imperfect similarity of two things,  
 but a perfect similarity of relations between  
 two quite dissimilar things.

Despite the tens of thousands of things and qualities distinguished symbolically, brevity and restriction in the numbers of classifications used by a society seem to be a global characteristic. Common examples are right/left, masculine/feminine, hard/soft, bones/blood, light/dark, odd/even, sun/moon. Also, right/left, masculine/feminine, jural power/mystical power (Needham 1980: 41-62). Thus, according to Turner (1976: 28-30), symbols have the power to unify apparently disparate objects and attributes and to condense ideas and the relations between these objects and attributes. Analogy and mental associations brought to the objects can determine how an object or activity is placed or arranged. For example, one symbol's many referents can be contrasted to another's to reveal further facets of its "meaning."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Contrasting symbols (as in a dual classificatory system and in complex ritual where three or more symbols are used together) can explain or associate a society's beliefs in God, the cosmos and key institutions of their culture. Turner says often simple symbols like marks drawn in white or red clay can connect a vast range of ideas to the participants while a complex symbol involving the viewer at many sensory levels may actually have a narrower or particularized message (Turner 1976: 184-189).

Symbols are thus shared by the members of the society and when they become systematized, comprise that society's religious system which in turn supports the moral system and the proper conduct of individuals in it. Importantly, this religious system (as represented by its symbols) becomes the mediator of life within that society, the source of wisdom, of practical realism, the model for proper conduct, and an exemplar of its social values. It is this association with everyday life which gives the symbols such significance and "motivation." They are forces which can support these values or oppose them. Whether objectified in ritual or in myth, they become implicit for that particular societal structure.

Symbolic communication then, in the form of language and other symbolic systems, provides the necessary stimulus for the normal social and mental development of human beings. Indeed, the acquiring of cultural knowledge is a requisite for becoming a "human being." Without learned social behavior and knowledge, man cannot become a communicating, functional member of society.

#### 1. "Nature" as a Symbol

Depictions of nature, such as procreative and fertility goddesses, animals as cosmic beings, and flora, have been found in the artifacts of societies around the world, which perhaps means that early man recognized the power of nature and its manifestations. In order to deal with these sometimes powerful manifestations of

rain, snow and drought, he developed explanations about the origins of and reasons for these phenomena. These explanations became the rules and regulations which governed the religious and social behavior and defined supernatural or religious powers. Magical beliefs seem to have inspired Paleolithic man to paint animals upon the walls of his caves in an effort to insure success in the hunt, and the maintenance of his food supply.

Durkheim (1915: 101-129) believed that man expressed his religious beliefs, that is, his communication with his ancestors or gods, through the use of totems.<sup>6</sup> Totemism, in which the idea that a tree, animal or stone contains a "soul" or "spirit," evolved to become the "carving out" of objects which represented that tree, animal or stone. The totem, (the actual material object) was the physical realization of his beliefs in spirits and souls. The totems "became" that "animal" and along with the myths associated with them were held accountable for "nature." For the purposes of this paper it is important to note it was the connections between man and the cosmological order which brought about these analogies between man and nature. The totem became man's way of controlling nature's sometime unfriendly forces.

As stated above, cosmological and social categories are the integers for symbolic classifications, that is, a society's beliefs

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<sup>6</sup>"Totem" is an Algonquin term utilized by Durkheim in his attempts to "systematize" the recording of ceremonial practices. Durkheim used it to describe the rituals of Australian and other diverse societies (Pickering 1975: 259).

about the origins and order within the universe determines the group's principles and teachings. But, just as man's experiences with nature differ according to ecological, economic, and political causes, so the patterns of symbolic systems vary from culture to culture. Each group's autonomous development means there can be no universal or cross-cultural pattern of symbols, although the many constantly recurring world-wide phenomena of seasonal change, drought and deluge, seedtime and harvest, are reflected in group representations such as art-works and ritual objects. Likewise, the regular associations and the properties of physical objects associated with these phenomena provide "a restricted set of motivated signifiers" (Hallpike 1979: 167). He goes on to state that these regular associations between man and nature, (his interactions with the physical world), his system of classifications derived from his dependence upon prototypical images, and the concrete, phenomenal associations of objects and attributes, provide symbolic systems which assert a point of view. This essay will show how a primary symbol, the portal, and its use in a major artifact, the Beth Alpha Mosaic, asserts a cultural view within the context of the Beth Alpha synagogue and its ritual.

Bernard Goldman in The Sacred Portal (1966: 70-71), speculates about the origins of the "portal," connecting it to a very early religious belief that man's destiny was irrevocably tied to natural elements like the sun and its varying aspects of light and dark.



Religious and philosophical teachings such as Platonism, neo-Platonism and Christian theology connected these natural elements to man ("as above, so below," uniting heaven and earth) (de Vyver 1981: 115). Analogies were made to birds, solar power and deities. The lintel of the doorway became "the sky" supported by the pillars and door-leaves of the "earth."

Just as the portal had its roots in cosmological beliefs or religion and had evolved in form and function, succeeding generations of art forms have utilized images from nature and functioned in ways which supported cultural beliefs and values. Scientific and philosophical change brought about a new understanding of the universe, new ideologies and aesthetic beliefs. Classicism, Romanticism and Symbolism were some of the Movements resulting from and a causal factor of these changes.

Artists in the late 19th century began the Symbolist Movement as a rejection of what they felt to be the rationalistic and art-process beliefs of the Impressionist Movement. They wanted to give art a deeper meaning, a relationship with the spiritual and sometimes exclusive inner world and ideas of the artist. The Symbolists, like the Classicists and Romanticists before them, are presented in this paper as artists who have continued the historical tradition, albeit in a very self-conscious and deliberate way, of depictions of nature in idealized and romantic ways.

Contemporary artists, such as Georgie O'Keefe (1887-1986), and Elizabeth Murray (1940- ), continue the tradition of paintings with symbolic content by employing references to nature and related

symbolic forms. Their inclusion in this paper connects ancient artifacts like the Beth Alpha Mosaic and its portal symbol, by way of the Symbolists, to this current exhibition. I believe the symbols and symbol systems used in this exhibition have their roots in this art-historical past.

Hallpike (1979: 143) says of the power of the symbol:

It is the combinatorial properties of symbols that, together with their motivation, give them the power of representing the categories of the society in a structured manner, to a degree which surpasses that of language in respect of emotional impact, concession and immunities to refutation or contradiction . . . .

Ritual such as an art exhibition is a transmitter of culture through the selections and emphases of the works exhibited. This viewpoint is supported by Johan Huizinga in Homo Ludens (1955: 7) who describes the "plastic arts" exhibition as "part of some rite or other, a festival, entertainment or social event."<sup>7</sup> A particular social form is sustained under the ritual's or exhibition's restricted code of behavior or procedure, which creates and maintains a particular form of social relationship between the participants. Ritual can therefore be a control

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<sup>7</sup>Huizinga's formal characteristics of play will be of interest in this context:

- (1) it is not ordinary but is pretending or for fun
- (2) it is free, a voluntary activity
- (3) it is secluedness, distinct in location and duration, is rhythm and harmony (1955: 7).

He described ritual as a higher form of play functioning as contest for something and as a representation of something (Huizinga 1955: 7).

system ultimately about the nature of man, his position within his society and in the world.

Clifford Geertz (1973: 127) describes the "evaluative elements" of a given culture as its "ethos," that is the

. . . tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood: it is the underlying attitude toward themselves and their world that life reflects.

The knowledge of how things "actually are" for the given culture, that is their concepts of self, nature, and society is their "world view." The one confirms the other as Geertz says, using the example of religious belief (ethos) and ritual (world view), "confronting" and "confirming" one another. Geertz says religion functions, amongst other things, to conserve the meanings mentioned above through the use of religious symbols.

The aim of this exhibition and accompanying paper is to show that through art-making and the expression of symbols and symbolic systems, associations of fact and thought are made to viewers. The use of anthropomorphic images and forms in the installation relate human anatomy and plant structure in ways which will distinguish one class of things from another. Chapter II of this document provides the theoretical support for the viewpoint that "nature," its elements and constituents, was the basis for many religious art-forms. The Beth Alpha Mosaic (6th century A.D.) in the Lower Galilee area of ancient Palestine is used as a specific art-work example of a primary symbol (the portal) expressing that particular society's beliefs and values in a ritual setting.

## CHAPTER II

### THE ROLE OF THE SYMBOL IN ART

This chapter will describe the portal as a symbol having its origins in depictions and beliefs in nature, as found within the ancient Beth Alpha Mosaic. Particular attention will be paid to cosmological analogies which tie this primary symbol to "house" and various aspects of nature like the sky and solar disks (Goldman 1966: 77-80).

Concepts of deity, that is, that some god or gods control or are responsible for nature's powerful phenomena, are naturally part of a society's cosmological beliefs. Leach (1976: 71) says that these concepts of deity have their basis in the belief that salvation of the soul rests in the worship of a particular deity or god. Religious practices, he says, are a response to this question, and act as a "mediating bridge" to the other world. The "omnipotent power" or God can then bring aid to the "impotent" man. In a real sense, the "bridges" are holy places like churches and synagogues. In this context, the Beth Alpha Synagogue and its symbolic forms, like the portal, will serve as the "bridge" connecting man to his God, through religious practice.

### A. The Portal as a Primary Symbol

This study of the "portal" as a primary symbol, will examine theoretical assumptions about this symbol, such as what things and actions are represented in the form and what links of association, ideological and sensory, are connected to it. Turner (1967: 28-30) has termed the many things and actions represented by a form (like a portal) a "condensation." He believes a dominant symbol encompasses the ideological (ethical and jural) norms of a society as well as the emotional or gross meanings and "significata." This means that both poles of meaning, gross and ideological, are united in a dominant symbol like the portal.<sup>8</sup>

There are two main sources for this study of the door motif as architectural symbolism. Bernard Goldman's book, The Sacred Portal (1966) provides theoretical support for the possible origins of portal symbolism in his descriptions of the Beth Alpha Mosaic. Also, Jane de Vyver's manuscript The Skene: A Universal Symbol of the Divine Presence: Perspectives on the

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<sup>8</sup>Turner's "significata" are qualities or links of association which enable the actor to bring together quite disparate ideas and phenomena. Some significata may refer to a group's moral and social orders, corporate groupings and values. They can also refer to gross, sensory, or physiological meanings at the same time. For example, Picasso's symbolist works of his "blue" and "rose" periods had content of a social and moral nature (Poor People Beside the Sea [1903]) as well as mood-inducing use of color and form (Turner 1967: 28-30).

Form and Function of a Symbol (1981), provided many insights into the expanded forms of the portal and its functions in sacred ritual.

Goldman (1966: 69-71) believes that the early door motif, for example, was associated with the sun as a "solar god" depicted as an eagle. Connections between birds and solar power had been made in the ancient Near East by the second millenium B.C. In later Assyrian and Persian art the sky power was depicted as a solar disk above the head of the human form. Akkadian cylinders from Upper Mesopotamia reveal a solar God framed by door leaves. The solar God is often shown between these open doors in some relation to mountains or a horizon. Goldman deciphers this pictorialization as "an unmistakable sign of the morning sun rising over the eastern hills" (1966: 70). House (the terrestrial home of the gods) and temple depictions of the figure between two portals are numerous enough to note the analogy that it is through these portals that the "divine" (royal) figures emerge as a manifestation of a superhuman being. Other analogies relate to this, the door leaves themselves as personifications of the divine, the doors as heavenly gates, the doorposts as the sky. Examples of these include another common depiction, that of mountains as the residence of gods. Goldman (1966: 77-81) states how The Bible makes mention of a 'pillar' (Genesis 28:22) which was to house the Lord and become "the 'gateway to heaven' (Genesis 28:17). " Pillars had evolved to become framing

devices and the solar disks previously mentioned, became lintels. Sometimes the solar disk had tendrils coming from it and came to be interpreted as the "canopy" over the sacred deity. These representations gradually became pictographs for "sacredness."<sup>9</sup> Goldman (1966: 87-88) goes on to say that these representations appeared in Assyrian, Egyptian, Hittite, Phoenician, Persian and Greek art. It is in these latter representations that the important change from pictogram to architecture occurs in the fifth and fourth century B.C. By cultural diffusion, the Egyptian solar disk "lintel" (which had taken on a drooping canopy-like characteristic) began to appear on Phoenician stelae and bowls, only now it was straight and supported on columns and pillasters. Shrines, (like the North Syrian scarab sealing), have been found using this depiction (Goldman 1966: 86). These architectural altar-pieces now depicted the "celestial abode" (on earth) of Tanit (a Phoenician goddess) enshrined between her columns (doorposts) which are the "pillars of heaven" and the lintel represented the horizon with its sky symbol, the sun. De Vyver proposes the Roman

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<sup>9</sup>Sacredness, in this case characterized by a rectangular framing device placed around a sacred figure or object, is distinguished from profaneness because it must be shown to be superior in dignity and power. The contrasting of diverse objects (like sacred and profane objects) originate from religious and social beliefs. They ensure the protection and isolation of particular objects and rituals (Durkheim 1915: 39-41).

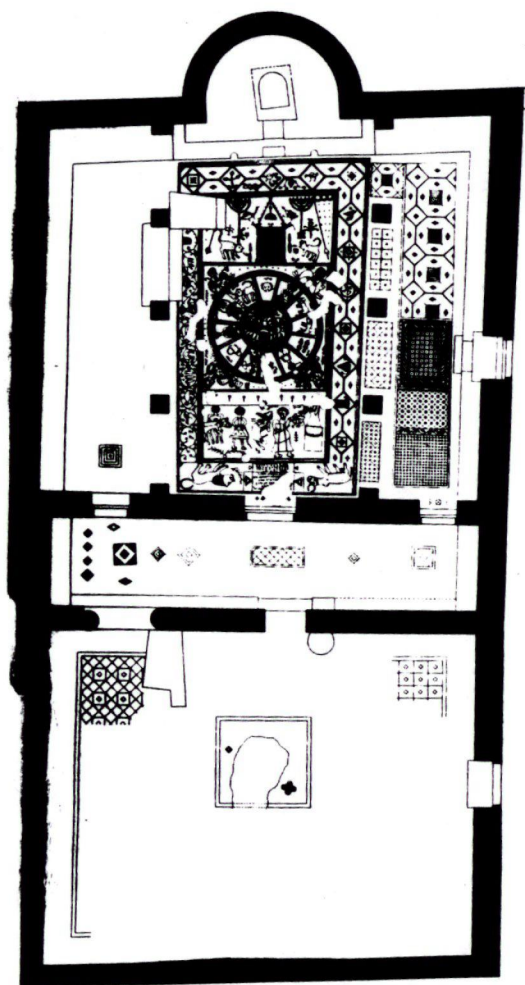
triumphal arch, under which the emperor is enthroned, and a reminder of the victorious presence of divine order through conquest, as a form embodying the symbolic meanings of the portal (1981: 160-162).

#### B. The Beth Alpha Mosaic

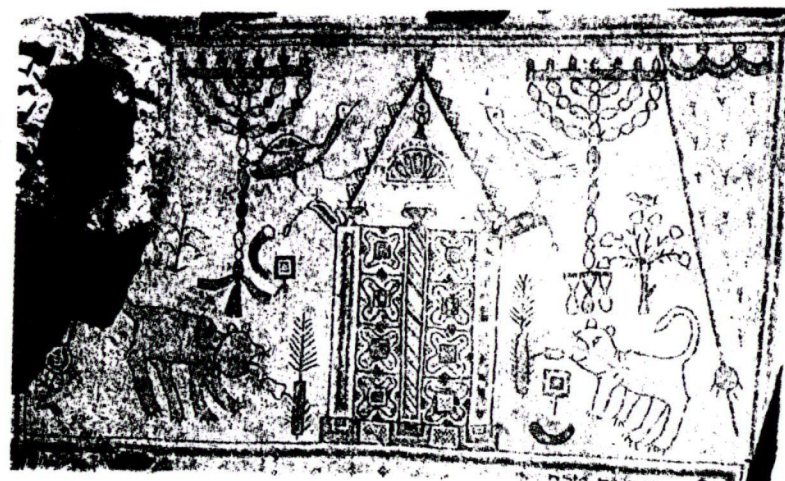
The ruins of the Beth Alpha Synagogue are near the modern community of Beth Alpha, in the Lower Galilee area of old Palestine in the plain of Esdraelon. The remains show that the synagogue was a long rectangular building of the basilica type. The main hall, roughly square in shape, was entered from the northern side. A semi-circular niche which probably held the Ark and Torah scrolls, was opposite on the southern wall, oriented towards the Holy City. The mosaic floor, probably first laid around 5th century A.D., shows signs of successive layers of new work over old fragments (Goldman 1966: 23-27). Proof exists of a restoration having been done during the reign of one of the Byzantine emperors--Justin I or Justin II, somewhere between 518 A.D. and 578 A.D. because of the Aramean legend and names of the artists worked pictorially into the floor. In the sixth or early seventh century the synagogue was destroyed (buried) quickly, explaining its excellent state of preservation (Goldman 1966: 23-27) (Plate III).

The mosaic is in three parts (Goldman 1966: 53-68). One panel depicts the "Sacrifice of Abraham" and "divine intervention"

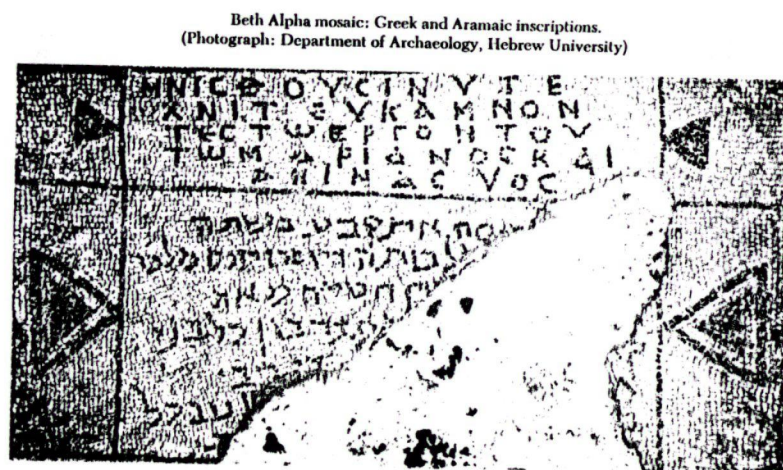




Beth Alpha: plan showing location of mosaics.  
(Drawing: Department of Archaeology, Hebrew University)



Beth Alpha mosaic: the Sacred Portal panel.  
(Photograph: Department of Archaeology, Hebrew University)



Beth Alpha mosaic: Greek and Aramaic inscriptions.  
(Photograph: Department of Archaeology, Hebrew University)

(the alternative offering of a ram). The next panel shows the pagan or non-sacred design of the zodiac and sun-god Helios. The last panel is situated before the niche and Torah shrine, and depicts a small building facade with double-leaved door and curtains, candelabra, birds, lions and other ritual equipment to the sides.

As stated earlier the so-called "pagan" design of zodiac and Helios can be partially explained by the almost certain interchange of non-Jewish artist and Jewish artist working across religious lines (Goldman 1966: 47-50). Also, formats such as this had an historically long and enduring life, passing from one area to another and becoming synthesized with local styles. Goldman (1966: 64-65) sees these depictions (symbols of heaven and its constellations) as befitting the centre of the prayer hall, as the step properly antecedent to the final one, entry into the holy area of the "portal." Goldman believes the portal or pedimented structure could stand for the lost-temple of Jerusalem, the innermost shrine (Ark) which contains the Torah, or even the synagogue structure itself (1966: 65-68). Looking back upon the evolution of the symbol from pre-Judaic times perhaps it is only necessary to understand it as symbolic of "sacredness," hallowed ground, and the House of God. The functions of the synagogue, to assemble and reinforce the ideology of the Jewish faith, are supported by the narrative scene of "Abraham's sacrifice," to come to worship. The cosmic scene connects to the final scene, a symbolization of the most

sacred.

Referring to Goldman's belief that the "pedimented structure" could symbolize the innermost shrine (Ark) containing the Torah, or even represent the synagogue itself, it would be useful to trace the origins of the Ark. Just as the pagan religions had their niche, altar, or shrine for god and goddess figures, so the Jewish synagogue placed its sacred writings (the Torah) within a container or Ark. Jewish ritual involves carrying this symbol around during service, before the community. Goldman (1966: 114) points out the vexing theological problem of whether the Ark of the Temple actually represents, and so becomes an object of worship, or is only a carrier of sacred writings. I believe that there may be some discrepancies between ideology and practice. If Goldman believes the mosaic "pedimented structure" symbolizes the Ark, some transference, in the eyes of the congregation, of the meaning of "sacredness" must have been attached to the "Ark" itself. More to the point, Goldman says the Ark "was originally conceived of as the cathedra, the throne of YHWH the Invisible, that is, the Ark represented His palace-shrine (1966: 127). Surely, as the "residence" of the Jewish God, some transference of worship must have become directed towards the Ark itself.

If as I believe, the Ark (or cupboard) containing the sacred laws is a "sacred place" within the temple or synagogue,

then it also becomes the "earthly-dwelling place" of the "Divine Presence." Indeed, Exodus 25:8 expresses the Lord's wish that Moses make a Holy-Place for Him, and that he would appear among them. So it is that not only so called simple societies establish dwelling places for their gods, but complex, that is societies having specialization of roles, do as well. De Vyver (1981: 83) believes humans have a need to do so because it objectifies and helps to understand the metaphysics of religious belief. She says:

. . . we can recognize that humans need a specially set-apart space, well veiled so that we will be protected from getting too close to the Numinous One, closer than we are able to tolerate . . . as creatures of the material world, we need a tangible, visible reality to lead us to the higher, invisible Truth and Reality.

We can now connect the Ark of the Beth Alpha synagogue, its function as the "earthly dwelling" place of the "Divine Presence" because it contained the scrolls, and the primary symbol, the portal. A transference had occurred in which the rectangular openings and doorways of ancient Eastern art forms (as found on cylinders, stelae, and altar-pieces), became assimilated into altar-forms, or in this case, the Ark. The portal had evolved to become a symbol capable of influencing and exerting some force within its context of synagogue and religious ritual. Turner (1976: 28-30) points out that all ritual symbols act as compromising forces between two opposing

tendencies in man, of the need for personal gratification of human drives, and of the need for social control or restriction. The "portal" and its use in representation and architectural model within synagogue ritual refers then to general ideological teachings and practice within the group participating. Turner (1966: 47) cautions however that there is a complex relationship between overt expression and the submerged and latent patterns of meaning of a symbol. Aspects such as the structure of the group performing the ritual and their principles (Ideology), their divisions and alliances on the basis of self-interest, incentives and restraints, are all expressed in and behave as motivators of the system. One certainly can not discount the very real effects of diffusion, the dispersal of aesthetic tradition from one community or country to another through the movement of artists, and political and military interference.

The portal, as seen in the Beth Alpha Mosaic, through its function as a religious symbol, helped to affirm and perpetuate traditional Jewish beliefs through links of association. It was, as Turner said, a "condensation" encompassing ideological and sensory meanings.

### C. The Symbolist Movement

This section will connect the Symbolist Movement of the 19th century to certain Modern artists (Gauguin, Munch, O'Keefe, and Dove) and contemporary artists (Amenoff and Murray) who are

linked to the Symbolist Movement because of their use of symbols and symbolic metaphors, and just as the portal had its roots in cosmological beliefs or religion (which originated in natural elements like Day, Night, Water), today's symbolist artists utilize imagery which relates to nature.

Seventeenth century Enlightenment philosophy, scientific and mathematical study, saw the emerging of a new attitude toward nature. According to Pijoan (1940: 281-282) these changes in man's attitude about his situation within his natural environment had their roots in the Renaissance rediscovery of antiquity. It is these changes in man's attitude about his predicament within his natural environment which will concern us. In Ideals and Idols (1979: 32-33), Gombrich quotes Hegel in his essay on the 'Dissolution of the Middle Ages through art and science' in Vorlesungen uber die Philosophie der Geschichte (Hegel 1928: 515-518):

. . . These three facts, the so-called  
revival of learning, the efflorescence of  
the fine arts and the discovery of America  
. . . may be compared to the dawn, the  
harbinger of a new fine day . . . .

Human anatomy, that is the proportion of body parts to the whole, body movement, studies of light and dark and perspective, were all seen to reflect the order necessary to impart homogeneity in architecture, sculpture and painting. Art became aligned to mathematics and philosophy. To illustrate this point, Tomory

(1936: 106-108) refers to Brunelleschi's architectural plans for St. Spirito in which he says there is

. . . . a complete unity between the regularity of the proportions, the uniformity of the light and the fact that the eye may take in at one glance the whole idea . . . .

Beauty came to be seen in the simple geometrical forms of the circle and square which symbolized God and His universe.

In classical Greek art and mythology, the Gods represented the various forces of nature in anthropomorphized forms. Whereas Greek art had a symbolic function, Tomory says Renaissance art tended to "generalize" a particular event in one painting (1969: 130). He describes Michelangelo's fresco the Creation of Man (1508-12) as symbolizing "the creation of physical beauty through spiritual power" and believes the classical traditions of the Renaissance had become infused with the individualized interpretations of Michelangelo (Tomory 1969: 128-130).

The Romantic Movement of the 19th century had its roots in the chivalric "Romances" of the Middle Ages. According to Harold Osborne (1968: 131), it brought about opposition to these principles of Classicism which had become the doctrine of the Academies from the late Renaissance (Osborne 1968: 131). He stated that the Romantic artist believed that rather than existing in an ordered, controlled environment he must look within himself for inspiration. They did not look to the power

of human reason, but objected to restrictions of all kinds. Their subjectivity and reverence for their own divinely-inspired imagination, became directed towards the transmission of experience and feeling into art (Lucie-Smith 1972: 23). Symbolist poets and painters took their inspiration from the Romantics, particularly in their rebellion against personal restraints and in their subjective attitudes towards their own destinies.

In From Symbolism to Baudelaire, Bertocci (1964: 4) argues the clear lineage from the Organicism or doctrine of nature of the Romantic Movement to the theory "of the Imagination" of the Symbolists. He believes that writers and poets like Mallarme and Valery, Eliot, Yeats; Coleridge and Poe are direct descendants of the Neo-Platonist philosophy that natural things and processes were created by "Ideas" from the "One" (Bertocci 1964: 6). Neo-Platonic belief held that the whole universe, including art-works, originated in God and could be expressed in symbols, however veiled. In Neo-Platonism a flower or human figure, can be the image of the invisible God and so stands as a symbol for certain ideals of beauty, reason and good. However, Bertocci believes a shift occurred over the years in the actual meaning of the symbol and that rather than thought, the symbol came to stand for something more tangible, biological, and living, and that the essence of the symbol could be brought into existence through art.



This shift in meaning of the symbol into something more tangible can be seen in the literary and painterly works of American artists in the late 19th and early 20th century. Nature was ascribed moralistic meanings. Nature came to be seen as a living entity with a soul communing directly with man, and in a religious sense, as the object and source of man's spirit. Attention was paid to the "noble savage" who supposedly lived a life of "primal innocence" (Novak 1880: 5). Writer and nature-lover Ralph Waldo Emerson in Nature: Addresses and Lectures (1903: 62) expresses this concept:

. . . The noblest ministry of nature is to stand as the apparition of God. It is the organ through which the universal spirit speaks to the individual, and strives to lead back the individual to it.

In Nature and Culture, Barbara Novak (1980: 3-13) describes how the American wilderness became associated with godliness (virgin land), and so Paradise (garden). Nature took on the highly moralistic associations described in landscape paintings by Thomas Cole and Albert Bierstadt. Aesthetic views, projected onto nature, became fused with religious views and artists could investigate this sensuous creation of the one God as they had been endowed " . . . with special gifts, the powers of revelation and creation" (Novak 1980: 9). "Art" had become a divine force, like nature.

American writers Emerson and Thoreau used flowers and

plants as symbols to express this analogy of nature and godliness:

Emerson wrote in Nature: Addresses and Lectures (1903: 10):

. . . The greatest delight which the fields  
and woods minister, is the suggestion of an  
occult relation between man and vegetable  
. . . . They nod to me, and I to them, . . .

Thoreau (1854) applied this analogy to the artist and his works:

. . . Some poets mature early and die young.  
Their fruits have a delicious flavor like  
strawberries . . . .

. . . Most poems, like the fruits, are the  
sweetest toward the blossom end . . . .<sup>10</sup>

Thus polarities existed between the new scientific discoveries like plant speciation and the idealism and associations with which these artists and writers imbued landscape, the wilderness and its elements, and floral and plant forms. Novak describes this period of American painting, the mid 19th century, as "attuned philosophically as well as art historically to the nature attitudes of the West." She sees it as serving the concept of nature as God, going further in this concept than the European philosophies which helped to create it (Novak 1980: 272-273). In Europe, artists and writers began to express their opposition to the rationalist and positivist movements of the 1880s. Jean Moreas

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<sup>10</sup>Thoreau was an obsessive nature-lover, a botanist, historian and recorder of nature lore who set out in his writings to show the many harmonies and agreements between nature and man. He constantly personifies nature, imbuing it with qualities both sensuous and ideological.

published his Symbolist Manifesto in 1886 in response to this growing disillusionment with society and the writers of the previous generation (Chipp 1970: 48).<sup>11</sup> Artists such as Mallarme, Verlaine, Rimbaud and Baudelaire felt rationalistic and materialistic values should be replaced by higher, more spiritual values expressed in art forms. Chipp states that Gustave Kahn, a Symbolist poet, defined their aims as taking a feeling or idea and giving it actual form in a poem or a painting--to objectivize the subjective (Chipp 1970: 500).<sup>12</sup>

Charles Baudelaire published his famous sonnet Correspondances in 1857. In it he uses the word "symbol" as it is more commonly used today:

Nature is a temple where the living pillars  
Confused word sometimes emerge.  
Man passes there through forests of symbols . . .<sup>13</sup>

The poet Baudelaire became an inspiration for artists who were to follow. His sonnet Correspondance expressed his belief

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<sup>11</sup>Moreas first used the term "les Symbolistes" in reference to the group of young writers and poets who formed a literary movement. They gathered around Mallarme and Verlaine. Baudelaire had been dead 19 years and Rimbaud was in Abyssinia, ignorant of the movement (Bertocci 1964: 186-187).

<sup>12</sup>According to Chipp (1970: 500) the poet Kahn reversed the usual process of subjectivizing the "tangible" world by starting out with feeling and objectivizing it in the form of a poem or painting.

<sup>13</sup>Another English translation (Bernstein 1947: 12) of this first verse is:

Nature is a temple where we live ironically  
In the midst of forests filled with dire confusions,  
Man, hearing confused words, passes symbolically  
Under the eyes of the birds watching his illusions.

that a work of art was to be so expressive and evocative that colors would suggest sounds and ideas and vice versa. In other words, color and form were to convey the idea and mood of a piece (Chipp 1970: 49-50).

According to Bertocci (1964: 22) "symbols" as perceived by Baudelaire, Mallarme and the other Symbolists evolved from the different perceptions of Romantic theorists like Goethe, Schlegel and Schilling. Schlegel theorized that poetry centred on metaphor, symbol and myth, and that metaphor "signifies the inter-relationship of all things--that each part of the universe mirrors the whole" (1964: 22). In contrast, the Symbolists used symbols as "components," as in the structuring of a poem through the use of metaphors. Poetry came to be seen as an "art" form conceived in terms of painterly and sculptural form, but also infused with mystery. Baudelaire and other artists of his time viewed nature as it existed in man's imagination, as it was expressed in symbols (Bertocci 1964: 29).

#### 1. Paul Gauguin (1848-1903)

Paul Gauguin was a near contemporary of Baudelaire and most receptive to his ideas as shown by his writings and paintings. Influenced by his friend Emile Bernard, who knew and sympathized with the new theories of the Symbolists, he met the poets Aurier and Mallarme. This circle of friends called Gauguin "the "Symbolist Painter" (Chipp 1970: 51-53).

In 1888 Gauguin visited Van Gogh in Arles and painted

Vintage at Arles--Human Miseries (1880), composed of a woman sitting, head in hands in the centre of the painting. To the left of her is another woman dressed in black. The figure in black must signify death, "that looks at the central figure like a sister" (Dorra 1978: 12). The woman pensively stares at the earth as if for consolation. Gauguin used this play of associations in Vintage as well as other paintings of the same period such as Human Miseries (1889), Village Drama (1894), Woman in the Hay with Pigs (1886) and Bonjour Monsieur Gauguin (1889), (Dorra 1978: 12-17).

Gauguin expressed his disillusionment with European society in his book Noa Noa (1919: 41-45) in which he wrote about his first visit to Tahiti:

. . . . I have escaped everything that is artificial, conventional, customary. I am entering into the truth, into nature  
 . . . . I develop normally and no longer occupy myself with useless vanities.

He seemed to revel in the seeming innocence of the natives: "They are happy and undisturbed" (1919: 61). He imagined himself at one with Nature, "as one of her children" (1919: 49) and found in their creation story, evidence of a "unity of matter," of a God who created the universe and who also conserves it (1919: 110-112). Gauguin (1919: 147) wrote of learning the deepest truths from his stay in Tahiti, such as having

. . . become better for understood and  
 having loved a human soul--a flower which  
 has ceased to bloom and whose fragrance  
 no one henceforth will breath.

Yet true to his Symbolist beliefs he writes to Emile  
 Shuffenecker, Pont Aven, 1888:

. . . do not paint too much after nature.  
 Art is an abstraction; derive this abstraction  
 from nature while dreaming before it . . .

Gauguin wrote that his painting Manao Tupapau (1892)  
 (Plate IV) is about the "spirit of the living person linked to the  
 spirit of the dead. Night and Day." Chipp (1970: 67-69) tells  
 how Gauguin describes the painting's two parts, the literary and  
 the musical part made up of

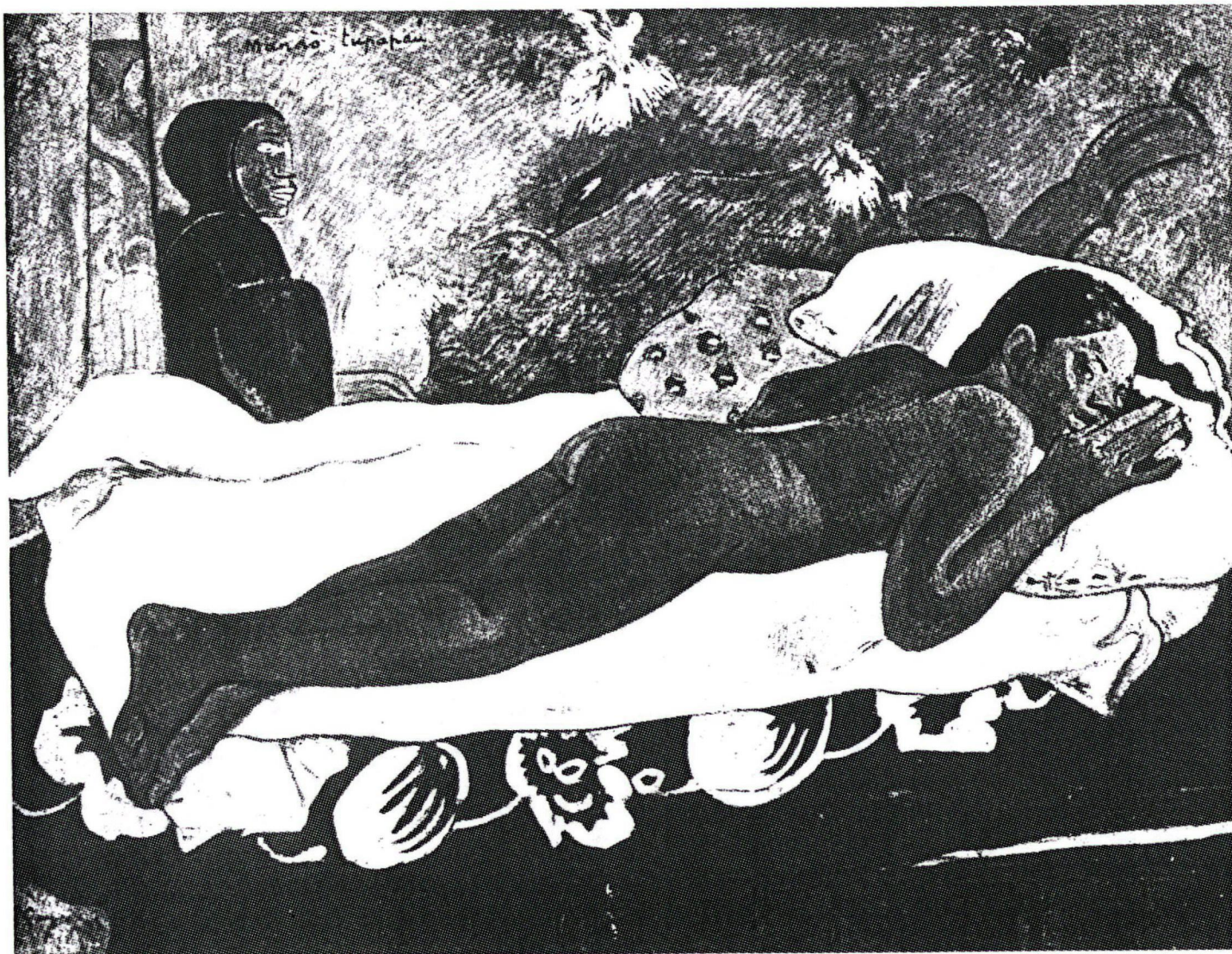
. . . undulating horizontal lines; harmonies  
 of orange and blue, united by the yellows  
 and purples (their derivatives) lit by  
 greenish sparks.

Gauguin was fascinated by the real-life encounter his vahine  
 had with "ghosts" and her experience served as the source for  
 his painting Manao Tupapau. In it he used the symbolic color  
 purple, background forms in imagined manifestations of ghosts,  
 phosphorescent flowers, and other signs from Tahitian mythology  
 (Teilhet-Fisk 1975: 69-74).

## 2. Edvard Munch (1863-1944)

Lucie-Smith (1972: 183) describes Munch's emotional paintings  
 as " . . . subject matter and symbol . . . intertwined, . . .





and not to be distinguished from one another . . . and Munch as a man with a mission who set out to make a symbolic presentation of his life through his paintings (Lucie-Smith 1972: 184). This was very much a Symbolist philosophy, and his Frieze of Life series represented the achievement of this goal (Danzker 1986: 12). The Frieze of Life paintings include The Scream (1893), Vampire (1893-94), The Kiss (1897), Jealousy (1907), and Death in the Sickroom (1893). Colors are used symbolically rather than descriptively and his rhythmic, wavy lines expressively convey turmoil. Included are landscapes like Starry Night (1923/24), Consolation (1924), and intense graphics such as Puberty (1901), The Sin (1901) and Desire (1898). Most certainly Munch's unhappy childhood and tormented adult life contributed to his desire to paint living, breathing, loving and suffering people.

### 3. Georgia O'Keefe (1887-1986) and Arthur Dove (1880-1946)

Robert Hughes (1986: 79) speaks of O'Keefe's distinctly American vision, which preceeded style, and her use of emblematic shapes of stone, bone and root based upon impressions of her beloved New Mexico landscape. Her large flower paintings in particular have been regarded as symbolic images despite her objections and efforts to emphasize "the formal and botanical over the symbolic and the sexual" (Hughes 1986: 79). The



paintings The White Trumpet Flower (1932), Bleeding Heart (1932), Two Calla Lilies on Pink (1928) and Red Poppy (1927) were early examples of her close-up encompassing images.

In her book, Georgia O'Keefe (1976: 24) she writes about her own feelings for her work:

. . . Well--I made you take time to look at what I saw and when you took time to really notice my flower you hung all your associations with flowers on my flower and you wrote about my flower as if I think and see what you think and see of the flower--and I don't.

Robert Hughes, in the Shock of the New (1980: 313), feels that O'Keefe's work has always been faithful to its relationship to nature, through the clarity and juxtapositioning of "the near and the far." Her themes are part of an ongoing process: the skyscrapers of New York with the sun radiating from glass, the mesas of the Southwest, barns and windows of the Gaspé Peninsula, enormous flowers and leaves, and bones and skulls. In them she shifts back and forth from "close-up" views of objects to distant views of landscape. This spaciousness and monumentality, simplicity of painting style and the moving back and forth between near-abstraction and near-realism, Hughes feels provided a basis or model for much painting in the U.S. after 1945.

Coming from the same ideological traditions as O'Keefe, (late 19th century and early 20th), Arthur Dove believed that art and nature correspond, that they come from the same realm

of truth and are "conjoined on the basis of mathematical law" (Cohn 1985: 85). He believed therefore that nature had a purposeful order, reinforced by empirical scientific studies, and so he proceeded to use "archetypal" geometric forms to enhance his studies of nature forms. Dove's "geometric" forms were not circles, squares and triangles but were "curves" derived from biological forms, a naturalizing of geometry, as in his painting Plant Forms (1915). Dove distorted scale, perspective and color to present his highly individualized view. He wrote in the Forum Exhibition Catalogue, (1916: 86-89) that he wished to paint "the reality of sensation" and "the reflection from my inner consciousness." Dove found parallels between the laws of nature at work in the smallest plant form, and in the cosmos and its laws of order. Dove's style was abstract, but it contained strong references to organic form.

#### 4. Gregory Amenoff (1948- )

Hearne Pardee (1983: 9) writes that the main characteristics of Amenoff's painting is abstraction combined with organic relationships of forms in space, in a tradition which harkens back to Dove and other American painters, along with associations of "rural hinterland or southwest landscape, and a "primitivism with sexual overtones." Amenoff places his dark powerful forms over a lighter background, modelling the forms in a crude

painterly style. They are close up, even microscopic, as in Bayou Teche (1980) and In the Fifth Season, painted in 1983. Pardee goes on to describe them as landscapes without entry or exit, with an ambiguity of figure-ground relationships and that Amenoff's connections are to nature, to "Mother Earth" described to us by his use of symbolic organic forms (Pardee 1983: 9).

##### 5. Elizabeth Murray (1940- )

Murray's paintings are composed of shaped canvases which come together and combine the separate shapes into one whole. The shapes are organic or biomorphic, that is, they may overlap or sit side by side and are the structure for "drawing" or painted images like hands, palettes, and paint brushes (Smith 1983: 100). Glueck (1983: c1 and c2) describes the imagery as a

. . . mating of abstract and figurative  
elements . . . the colors snap energetically  
. . . the . . . shapes . . . hold together  
with thrilling tension.

The painting Keyhole (1982) combines jagged exterior lines, overlapping bulbous organic forms surrounding a negative keyhole at the centre (Gardner 1984: 47-55). The artist feels that these images and shapes create highly personalized analogues of her experiences. Breaking (1980), she says (Murray 1981: 102-105), expresses " . . . the implied themes of dominance and submission, connection and integration . . . ."

Murray's paintings are a combination of painting and sculpture. In her painting Yikes (1982) which is made up of two overlapping shaped canvases, there is a clearly discernable image of a cup. In an interview with Gardner (1984: 55) she says:

. . . The cup is an extremely female symbol. It can be seen as an encasement for the female genitals. It is a male symbol too: the winner of an athletic event gets a cup. I also find the cup--as an object, a beautiful image in itself. Handle, saucer, cup - three circular shapes.

Recently Murray has included more figurative elements in psychological subject matter. Can You Hear Me contains a small red face with an extended balloon shape. Smith feels that Munch, Miro and Picasso's Surrealism seem to be her art-historical sources (Smith 1984: 107). Murray says her sources lie within herself, that artists always paint about themselves whether expressed in fantasy or reality about their feelings and their vision (Gardner 1984: 55).

Lucie-Smith (1972: 206) sees the Symbolist Movement as a bridge from the Romantic Movement to modern art today. He sees the process as a continuous one, from the poets Baudelaire and Mallarme, who, deriving their philosophies from Romantic theorists such as Goethe, Schlegel and Shilling, brought about a new, bolder interpretation of the word symbol to artists such as Gauguin, Munch, O'Keefe and Murray.

Indeed Amenoff and Murray reflect many of the Symbolists'

ideas of revolution and avant-garde and of Modernism's heritage from Symbolism of the materiality through use of color and form, space and surface, of the art object. Lucie-Smith (1972: 14-15) describes a Renaissance painting, Giorgione's Tempesta (1505) as an example of the way symbolism in art moved beyond allegory into less clearly defined meanings. Details in the painting, such as the soldier and gypsy girl, by tradition represented "the familiars of Fortune." Broken columns stood as emblems of "fortitude and strength." But there is a further suggestion and meaning conveyed in the painting which goes beyond these recognizable symbols. For example, why does the gypsy girl look towards the viewer and not to the soldier? There is the notion of a mood from this placement of figures in the landscape. It is this change from allegorical depictions, as realistic or naturalistic types of symbols, to their use as "components" in the form of metaphor, which brought about the great changes of the Symbolist Movement. The mystical or supernatural role of the artist, to express the sensuous perception of experience, can be seen in the works of the artists mentioned. O'Keefe's flowers and skulls, Munch's undulating landscapes, Gauguin's search into primitive ethnology expressed in color and form, and Murray's cut out forms containing mundane images like a cup have the power through expression to evoke new meaning in an associative way.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE EXHIBITION

This chapter will show how the root metaphor of the dual classificatory system of maleness and femaleness and the subsidiary forms and images of an architectural and organic type, were realized as paintings and three-dimensional art-objects within the installation. The alignment of these two systems, right/male as left/female and the subsidiary forms and images of the house/garden expressed in plant-like forms arranged according to this classificatory system, is meant to show how a particular space is organized. Classificatory systems have a hierarchial order, that is some parts are more dominant than others. Almost universally, as above (Needham 1980: 41-62), right seems to dominate over left, and man, who is generally seen to stand in a right relationship to woman, is then generally associated with the right and woman with the left. This installation serves as a metaphor and also as an example of this system.

According to Barrett (1984: 68) aesthetic decisions of the kind made in this installation come as much from cultural "insinuation" as from the artist's creative imagination. The tradition of originality of form, style and content in contemporary art, the high acceptability of novelty within the art community

and the withdrawal from traditional art forms, can be truthfully stated as a norm within this contemporary art scene. It might be said that deviations from tradition have become the tradition. It will therefore be for others to "guess" at the "social" or "psychological" mix necessary within the artist to create the artistic combinations of this installation.

The origins of this installation can be found in my increasing interest in the role that art and artists play in society. I began to question the purpose and functions of art, particularly in this contemporary western Canadian area. These questions in turn pointed back to an even weightier problem, of the definition of art itself. This kind of introspective enquiry is normal, I feel, for an artist who has been involved in process and study for a number of years. Naturally, great pitfalls await anyone wanting to objectively understand a particular subject when they are an "insider" actively engaged in the pursuit. However lack of objectivity can perhaps be weighted against the value of being one "who speaks the language of the people." A clearer understanding about the role and function of art came to me from this insider experience coupled with an interest in trying to define the meaning of art itself.

By studying the multifunctional practices of art as it serves the religious, psychological and social needs of a group, the difficulty of finding a clear definition of art becomes

apparent. Otto Baensch, in Art and Feeling (1960: 23) defines art on the basis of feeling:

How can we capture, keep and fix feelings so that content may be presented to our consciousness . . . we can do it by creating objects wherein the feelings we seek to fix and are so definitely embodied that subjects confronted with these objects, . . . cannot but uniformly experience a non-sensuous apperception of the feelings . . . such objects are called "works of art," and by "art," we designate the activity that produces them.

Franz Boas (1927: 10) in Primitive Art defines art on the basis of form and technique:

When the technical treatment has attained a certain degree of excellence, when the control of the process involved is such that certain typical forms are produced, we call the process an art, and however simple the forms may be, they may be judged from the point of view of formal perfection . . . .

Robert Layton in the Anthropology of Art (1981: 5) proposes a definition of art I feel is satisfactory because of its broader definition. Layton recognizes two perceptions, one dealing with aesthetics and the other as a communication system based upon particular images like symbols. He sees both as applicable in most cases, indeed they may be "alternative realizations or a more general goal," or "quality at the 'core' of art" (1981: 5).

From this definition of art I became increasingly interested in the function of art as a symbolizing communication system.



Understanding it as a "component" of a culture system which included such things as laws, morals, knowledge and a whole range of activities learned and passed on by man within his own group, I saw art as having some spiritual as well as social value in helping to maintain these institutions. In a practical example, art functions to provide a certain atmosphere or environment as a fine art object, it can be used by public institutions like political parties and religious communities in a propagandist way, and it can convey a way of life, moral values and insights through its images. It can serve in a recreational or cathartic way, and can educate historically, psychologically and sociologically.

This installation originated from my interest in cultural symbols, their sources within the culture, and their functions as a relevant communicating and aesthetic force. I chose the almost universally used classificatory system right/male and left/female as a structure for the analogues house/garden and their adjacent forms in order to bring about associations and connections between the two. I believe they will reaffirm or assert particular cultural beliefs and values relevant to this society.

The installation is in the form of a rectangular enclosed space (28' x 80') with a central doorway in the west side or passageway. Upon entering, the viewer can move to the left or

to the right of the exhibition space. There are variations in the placement of objects, their characteristics and their presentation.

Within the rectangular structure of the installation are the subsidiary forms and images. Just as a house or garden has interior structural forms and particular objects serving different functions within it, this installation has various levels or storeys, doorways, or entrances, rooms and a closet or niche. In The Hidden Dimension (1966: xxii) Edward T. Hall says "space is one of the basic underlying organizational systems for all living things--particularly people" and that culture greatly determines why we organize space in a particular way. Hall places great emphasis on the aesthetic use of space, believing that spacial experience is a multisensory one. Again, observing how a man orders his environment can show much about his sensory perceptions and current art and artifacts provide valuable clues about these perceptions. Hall (1966: 82-84) shows how the early Egyptian experience of space was different from our own present-day perceptions. He says that in their temple structures, the Egyptians were concerned with correct alignment of ceremonial structures according to their idea of the alignment of the cosmos. They wanted to control the supernatural "by symbolically reproducing it." In contrast, western ideas of a religious building are with space which is small and intimate

like a chapel or spacially large and awe-inspiring like the great cathedrals (Hall 1966: 82-84).

At the mid-point or axis of the rectangular exhibition space is the construction Love-in-a-Mist/Devil-in-a-Bush which represents a boundary of social as well as physical space, that is, it is situated midway between the left, female, and right, male, end of the installation. It represents the ambiguous nature of what occurs when two opposites "blend" or meet at a midline point. Indeed there could be some debate about just how much blending, merging or even synthesis does occur. Leach (1976: 33-35) says boundaries are the inventions of man, that in nature things are naturally continuous and evenflowing, and one state gradually becomes another. For example in order for man to impose some sense of order on the passing of time, calendar breaks such as birthdays, New Years, harvest time, etc., are used to break up the continuum and ritual is used to mark the crossing from one time to another or from one state to another (as in marriage). In this sense then, the ritual becomes a boundary of sorts. It exists in what Leach referred to as "no man's time" (1976: 34-35). One could also consider the fence which divides one property from another and belongs to one side or the other as having special status. This construction then becomes a liminal or threshold object belonging to one side or the other, having qualities of transition and

synthesis.

These art-works exist then within a carefully bound space, in divisions which represent particular classificatory categories and so a particular type of social organization (see Plate 1). They interact within their own divisions as symbols and in the context of the installation as art-pieces relating through form, scale and color to each other. Flora bunda and Ruta бага are the focal points at opposing ends of the space and can be viewed from a distance or, by standing upon the platforms, close-up. The right/male/Ruta бага piece is the highest and can be seen clearly with no obstruction. The left/female/Flora bunda is set at a lower level but is partially obstructed from view by two screens. The viewer can pass behind the screens for a close-up look. At either end is a "room" containing the paintings Scarlet runner, Flamboyant, and Trumpet creeper. In front of them are floor pieces, Ladder, Goat-beard in the right end of the space, and Workbench, and Niche in the left end of the space. All of the sculptures, paintings and painting reliefs in the installation relate their images to one another in three ways:

1. by referring to male/female activities like hunting and fighting for men, domestic activities for females.
2. by referring to male/female character qualities like the striving mobility of the male and the feminine flower-like

quality of the woman.

3. by referring to male/female objects like guns for men and a table, spoon, mirror for females.

Although these objects, qualities and activities were not all dealt with directly in the installation, the titles, forms, scale and color of the pieces should serve as a stimulus to associations. It must certainly be remembered that, as symbolic paintings and sculptures, they affirm a point of view about the classificatory system of male/female in our culture which might be described as male/female as right/left as high/low as vertical/horizontal as order/disorder as open/mysterious as ladder/workbench. These works do not explain this symbolic order or claim to be right. They only assert a position.

In "Dialectics of Gender in Senufo Masquerade" Anita Glaze describes a society in which male-female qualities are expressed in ritual and artistic expression as a "oneness," a "male-female complementarity perceived as the ideal social order, divinely ordained by the creator . . . ." Senufo society believes that "true community depends upon the different contributions of male and female moieties in human society." Glaze gives an account of the ways male and female symbols are used in the male ritual or masquerade and insignia such as masks using male-female symbols as parts, female symbols which complete

or behave as components of male symbolic sets, and instances where symbols are used to imply women's roles in activities. Glaze states very clearly the cultural polarities associated with each gender. Ideal male-associated symbolism denotes strength, knowledge and authority. Ideal female-associated symbols deal with fertility, beauty, order, and healing. Glaze says that in Senufo society symbols which express these ideal qualities are:

. . . an open and flexible system, . . .  
 like a constellation in which specific  
 meanings or associations change according  
 to their relative position to one another  
 . . . perception of a particular image or  
 color or pattern activates the power of  
 suggestion . . . retrieving whatever levels  
 and nuances of meaning his or her knowledge  
 and experience may permit (1986: 30-39).

I believe the male and female associated symbols of this installation express some of the ideals of this society.

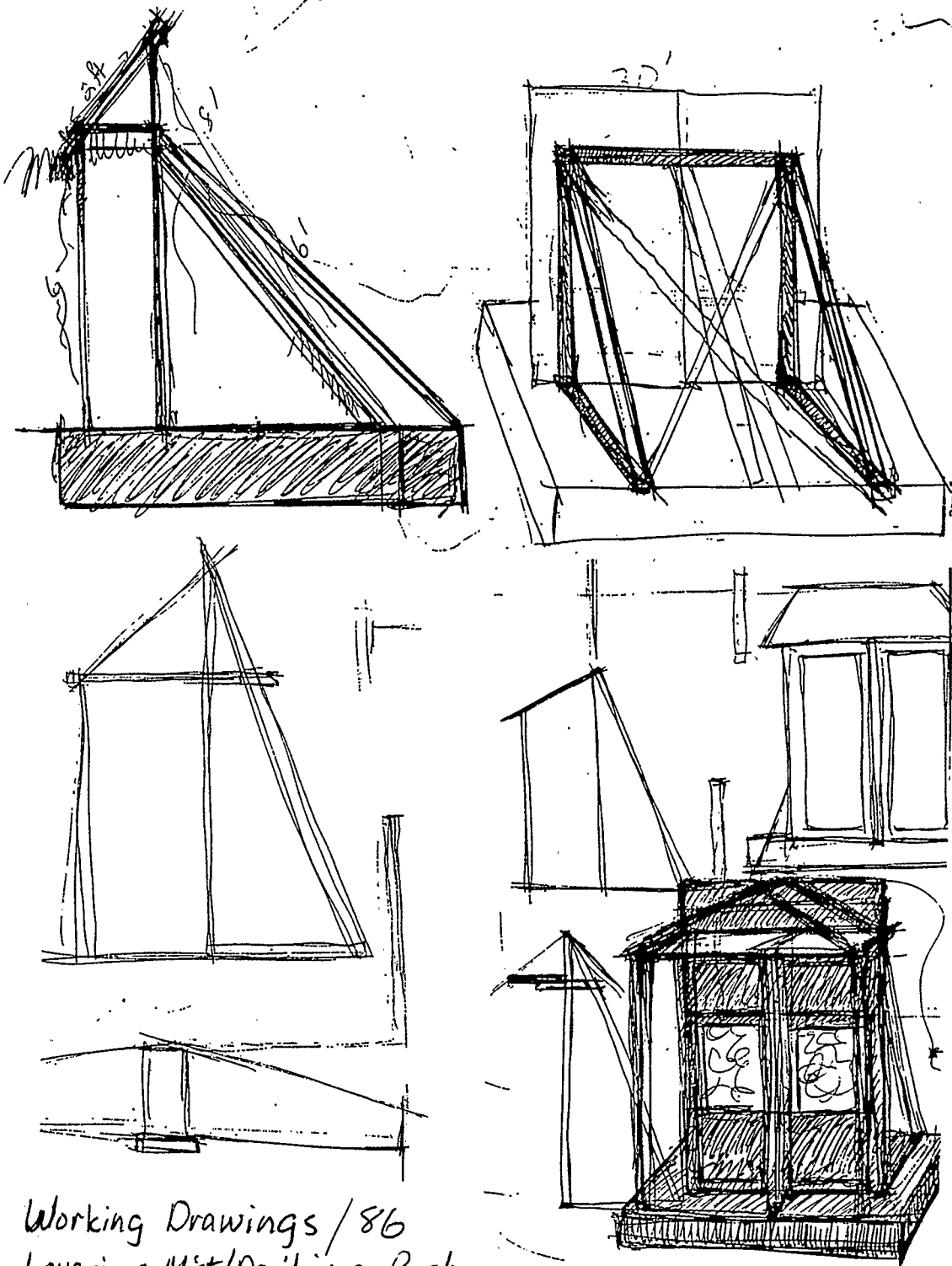
#### A. Description of the Work

The installation can be divided into three areas, the right/male end, the left/female end, and the middle area dividing one from the other. The entrance is in the centre of the west wall and connected to the middle area by an 8' long passageway. Although there is no overhead lintel or cross-piece, this entrance conveys such things as the transition from one state to another, that is, leaving the outside gallery area and

entering a specially set apart space. The high walls and color modification of the passage walls "introduce" the viewer, in some respects, to the images, forms and color ahead. This entranceway also frames or focuses attention on the piece directly in front of it. There is an invitation to enter and look inside (Plate V).

Love-in-a-Mist/Devil-in-a-Bush makes reference to a boundary because of its position within the installation, but in actual fact is not a boundary because each side still retains its own characteristics. It becomes a sacred place--set high up and separated by its framing from the profane forms around it. It becomes, in its liminality, neither one nor the other, betwixt and between.

The free standing piece Love-in-a-Mist/Devil-in-a-Bush (9' x 10') sits upon a platform, and is of painted wood construction. It has an altar-shaped front, consisting of a roof-like projection and six door-post framing devices across the front. Enclosed within these "frames" are two paintings on canvas (24" x 28") with images or organic/plant shapes resembling fruit or a bud-like object. The paintings represent the coming together, under one roof, of the left and right polarities of this exhibition. There are associations of house construction, stage props, and even a western "store-front" construction as shown by the supports on the back of the 8' x 8' forms.



Working Drawings / 86  
Love-in-a-Mist / Devil-in-a-Bush



Towards the right of this piece are two floor constructions arranged so that the viewer can see the paintings along the opposite wall and the relief painting on the end wall of the installation site. The viewer can pass between them and around them.

Goat's Beard is a wooden 8' tree-like sculpture. Its black trunk, inside the poly-chromed box, ends in a circular shaped, two-sided form, having three protrudences, one fork-like, one crab-like and one bud-like. The circular shape is painted on both sides, produced by quick paintladen brushstrokes over dry-brushed linear marks. Bright yellow, blue and red deny the implied shapes of fork, crab and bud as they are applied expressionistically across the surface of the form.

Ladder is an 8' tall wooden sculpture (red-orange in front and dark grey on the reverse side) with four multi-cross pieces attached with wooden pegs to the sides. This totemic structure has surfaces which are glazed in some areas and matte in others. Underlying marks of paint process show through in some parts of the ladder's front face. Ladder has a playful appearance. It does not stand up straight or tall and its rungs are not equadistant apart. One could not climb too far up this ladder.

Trumpetcreeper, like its flower name, is a four panel painting (8' x 16') in acrylic on canvas. The panels are painted with organic or anthorpomorphic forms which swirl, twist

and wind across the canvas surface. The forms exist in a medium to shallow space and include references to realistic form. Color is used to associate some forms with others and to provide a reading of "organic" growth across the panels. In other places color is used to create illusion and contradiction. This four panel painting is a landscape mural to which the viewer has little or no visual entry or exit. It faces the floor pieces.

On the end wall or the right side of the installation is a painting relief composed of plywood and Hexcel aluminum. This construction is of cutout metal and wooden pieces attached to each other in an organic form approximately 8' x 8'. It sits above a platform (6' x 12') upon which the lowest part of the relief appears to be touching. The platform and attached stair allow direct access to the piece for viewers. This upper level raises and separates Ruta бага from the more "profane" floor objects. Its shiny metal parts add to the "preciousness" of the object. It becomes icon-like, a symbol with connotations of an important personage, God, object, rare flower, manuscript or painting. Color and form are used to draw the viewer from the tall vertical "stalks" above to the "root-like" earth colored jagged forms below.

The left end of the installation repeats the right end format with some exceptions. There is an additional closet

or niche on the west wall of the installation. The Niche is a three-sided space (2' x 2' x 8') consisting of wooden shapes on a red surface. The shapes are of varying sizes and color, combining to give the impression of overloading, of a closet so full of memorabilia it can take no more. There are connotations of a garden grotto or shrine, closet or corner cabinet.

Flamboyant is a painting dyptich on canvas (11' x 5½') composed of organic forms swirling across the surface of both canvases. The forms exist in a shallow space and are mostly red in color. This painting is meant to connect visually with Niche.

A four panel acrylic painting Scarletrunner (8' x 16') is situated opposite the Niche. Like Trumpetcreeper the painting is full of organic shapes covering the entire surface of the canvas. The forms tend to be more circular than in Trumpetcreeper, and seem to be joined together like the root of a vine. The forms are placed in the same shallow to medium space. Color intensity and luminosity is as charged as the forms are active. There is no reduction of color as the imagery increases. Scarletrunner is a landscape.

Above a platform at the left end of the installation space is the painting relief Flora bunda. It is also constructed of cutout wood and aluminum pieces and is shaped like a large

flower and stem. Its parts are partially cut from previous paintings containing forms which curl and turn. The directional colors and forms were used to emphasize the petal-like shapes of the two flower-buds. Some shapes have been cut out and inlaid with other shapes to create ambiguities of space. Large cutout aluminum parts have been ground to a shiny appearance to provide a sense of form and for the sensuous appeal of their enclosed forms. These "precious" areas again signify the sacred aspects of this piece, the separation from objects at the floor level. Two colored panels (4' x 8') stand in front of the painting, leaving an entranceway of 4' between. They provide a screen or barrier and prevent the full viewing of Flora bunda from a distance. Flora bunda must be seen in full close-up from the platform inside the two wooden screens. The doorway provides glimpses only of the main stem and parts of the petals when viewed from a distance. Associations of the hidden, mysterious, withdrawn, or private space of the woman's world may be inferred from this piece.

The relief paintings and sculpture are most often created from shapes cut out of previous work. The choice of what "old" work to incorporate into the "new" is made on the basis of size, color and the forms which seem to suit the new image. Offcuts, that is, the shapes remaining after a piece has been cut, make up about half of the cut pieces. If a new piece of

wood is used it is sometimes painted arbitrarily with no thought as to its suitability for a particular form. Forms are sometimes cut out and inlaid into other cutouts. Flora bunda contains many pieces from paintings done four years ago which have been incorporated, and indeed, as new forms, dominate several parts of the relief.

Intuitive decision-making, the recycling of "old" work into "new" to create a synthesis of style relates to the techniques employed in working drawings for the paintings Scarletrunner and Trumpetcreeper. A series of 18 drawings (24" x 32") were completed which were my interpretations of the cell structures of various parts or plants. Their resemblance to flowering plants inspired me to paint a "stem-like" form underneath. The expressionistic drawing and painting surface and exuberant color produced active and abundant surfaces suitable as a source for the two paintings. I video-taped certain areas of the drawings using selective close-up and color techniques. The video-tape was then photographed from a T.V. monitor with 35 mm film and particular prints were chosen as the source for the four panel paintings. The images were scaled up from the 3.5" x 5" prints to 4' x 8' canvasses by free drawing alone. It was important to me that discrepancies in the image, from print to canvas occur. This was a way of moving the image further from the technical process.

The sculptures, paintings and painting reliefs all tend to be expressively colored and formed, organic in material, form and handiwork. They often contain shapes from "old" work which has been "reinvested" into a "new" work. The "old" work is transformed through physical change just as a symbol can be transformed through social change. Although informal in nature they are placed within the formal structure of the installation site creating a dichotomy of presentation consistent with the aim of the installation. Goldwater (1969: 89) writes about the modern sculptor and his affinities to architecture:

. . . understandably the modern sculptor is often tempted to approach architecture. When he does . . . he builds a symbolic (not functional) dwelling, useful to the spirit alone. Though we walk through this construction, we do so as spectators, and though we enter its walls, it remains open while it surrounds us . . . .

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

This installation demonstrates that social categories or classifications and the divisions of space used by a group are closely connected, and that messages about the divisions of space and the categories can be expressed in symbols. I believe the varieties of symbols used, whether they were to show activities, character qualities, or objects, were at least as much the result of "cultural" insinuation, as Barrett (1984: 68) says, as imaginal thinking. Although this is certainly a correct way of thinking, that symbols are culturally bound and constructed, a cautionary note must be interjected about the strict functionalist belief in the causal connections between an event like art-making and the beliefs and values of society. John Beattie in Other Cultures (1964: 72) says it is an idealistic way of thinking, for societies are, after all, only intellectual constructs or models. Societies are also made of living, breathing, thinking, fighting and loving human beings who act according to their own interests. Therefore, an event like art-making, because it is part of social process but created by individuals, can impel change. I do not believe however that artists, and their art, are the great revolutionaries

that history makes them out to be. The see-saw between the forces of self-interest and enculturation must generally even out.

By giving the abstract notions about the social categories of maleness and femaleness, and their use of space, actual form as an art exhibit and a gallery opening, and bringing together or condensing these two ideas, polarities of maleness and femaleness are expressed as right is to left. This is also expressed in the ordering of space using the objects and images of a house and/or garden. That is the function of this installation, and if these associations are insightful, discerning, and cause new perceptions about the connections between the two ideas, then a sort of social change will have occurred.

Roland Bartel in Metaphors and Symbols (1983: 80-81) writes that the onset of language was instrumental in establishing humanity, that it enabled man to learn what had gone before and to create new language in response to the assimilation of new facts and experiences. He said new experiences and facts need to be named to ensure their clarity and to exercise "some control over it." As Bartel says, one of Adam's first assignments in the Garden of Eden was to name all living creatures. Since then man has needed verbal symbols or labels to distinguish one thing from another. Bartel believes scientists and poets, through their work, have discovered that there are relationships or



connections between the symbols themselves and upon the things they symbolize, an interrelatedness of all things.

Through the comparisons of the visual metaphor of this installation, the bringing together of two different perceptions of things pertaining to maleness and femaleness, new relationships, associations and connotations can be discovered. Perhaps they will suggest others.

## APPENDIX

Two changes were made to the exhibition resulting from decisions made during the installation of the various pieces.

- A. Color modification of the entranceway was not made. The passage was left white like the other walls because I felt color would detract from the piece Love-in-a-Mist/Devil-in-a-Bush situated directly through the passage.
- B. Colored panels were installed in front of the piece Flora bunda. The decision was made to remove them after 24 hours although they suited the theoretical decisions made prior to installing the exhibition. I felt they unnecessarily obstructed views of Flora bunda.

These two decisions were made while I was in the process of installing the exhibition and were contrary to planning done in the months before installation. Aesthetic decisions of this sort can only be made by the artist if she or he remains open to the necessities and possibilities of such change.

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