

The Sixth

ERIC SYMES ABBOTT

Memorial Lecture

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The Spiritual in Art

I should like to start by saying how deeply honoured I feel to have been invited to deliver the Eric Symes Abbott and Walter Hussey memorial lectures this evening. Walter Hussey I never knew, but Eric Abbott I did meet on one or two occasions shortly before his death, and I feel a great sense of privilege in being able to pay my respects in this way to my brief by very clear memory of him. But coupled with a sense of privilege is also one of intimidation, for I am very conscious of the pitfalls of speaking on such an occasion, to such an audience as this, on a subject for which I have no proper credentials. I am not a theologian, nor am I a professional art-historian; many of you, I imagine, are one or the other of these. So I must ask you, not to listen to this lecture as theology or art history, for it is neither of these things. Instead, it is meant as a very personal view of the concept of spirituality, as it is revealed and enriched through works of art.

I have always found this concept of spirituality remarkably elusive. Perhaps I am not alone in this, for it also seems to me to be one that people are readily able to recognise, but much more reluctant to define. It is applied with equal weight, and (one intuitively accepts) with equal validity to a range of objects that have, on the face of it, little in common. Persons, certain kinds of actions, writings, paintings, music both secular and religious are all from time to time singled out as exemplifying this quality and yet if one tries to isolate the shared characteristic that allows the music or the painting, the behaviour or the prayer all to be termed spiritual it is not immediately evident what sort of value one might be seeking. The spiritual, one is tempted to conclude, like the 'good', is not there in any real or substantive form. And yet it does not seem adequate either to say that talk of the spiritual is merely an interpretive overlay. Again one intuitively senses that there is more to it than that.

In confining myself to the visual arts in this lecture I want to keep three main questions in mind: first, what do we mean by the spiritual in art? Secondly, how, by what means, are such values conveyed? And finally, is there any special sense in which *art* expresses or illuminates the notion of spirituality?

I would like to approach these questions through a careful consideration of three very different works of art: Piero della Francesca's *Baptism*, a sculpture from our own time, and a still life painting, a Spanish seventeenth-century work by Juan Sanchez Cotan. But before doing that I should perhaps say something in general about the first of my three questions; what do we mean by the spiritual in art?

Much of what has been written on this subject seems to be based on the assumption that this quality is something roughly equivalent to 'that which evokes intense feeling'. I have in mind something rather more restricted, which I would define – not too pompously, I hope – as that which evokes a sense of the transcendent. This is, of course, an inescapably religious approach, although it is religious in a very fundamental way and certainly has nothing specifically to do with Christianity. M.T.H. Sadler, in his introduction to Wassily Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, remarked that "religion, in the sense of awe, is present in all true art" and it is this very primitive sense that I am thinking of when I say spiritual art is religious.

Equally, it would be well not to ignore the emotional dimension to this sense of the transcendent. I am thinking here not of extreme passions, but of the sort of emotion that accompanies, for example, a sense of compassion, an experience of great beauty, or the feeling that we all have from time to time, that there are perhaps more things in heaven and earth than in our more self-determining moods we should like to think possible.

I can perhaps make this point more effectively by glancing first at a variety of paintings which have in my opinion, in one way or another, a spiritual dimension, and contrasting them with other, perhaps more superficially similar works of art but which in my view lack this quality.

On the left hand screen is another work of Piero della Francesca, the *Resurrection*, on the right Tintoretto's version of the same event. The contrast could hardly be greater. One addresses the moment of salvation and confronts the viewer with a cold, haunting vision of Christ, haunted himself it seems, rising silently, unseen, into a world that has no inkling of what is happening. It is one of the most powerful – and I would say intensely spiritual – images I know. The other – in the Ashmolean Museum – is, I find, principally a display of dramatic aerobatics, Christus Houdini. It amazes; it does not move.

Let us take another pair of images. Watteau's pathetic portrait of the clown Gilles and Gainsborough's portrait of Madame Giovanna Baccelli. The Gainsborough is an elegant party piece, the famous dancer dressed for a part; the Watteau on the other hand is the party gone wrong, the moment when the professional entertainer, the man whose job it is to make us laugh, is caught unawares, unable to amuse himself. It has at its core great pathos which it invites us in to share, to experience with him, and which I would call spiritual.

If Gilles' melancholy has a spiritual dimension, Edward Munch's traumatic *Scream*, it seems to me, has not. It is too loud; we shy away from it and if we look it is through a sort of voyeurism rather than sympathy. We stay, I feel, very much on the outside. We see nothing beyond this vision of angst but the angst itself and are driven to no realm of contemplation beyond thanking our luck that it is she rather than we who is experiencing this terror.

Two portraits, both done in 1800: David's of Napoleon crossing the Alps and Goya's of King Charles IV of Spain. Both are official, both meant, by the sitters if not the painter, to project a suitable image. Yet the outcomes are quite different. David's is every bit the flattering rendition, Napoleon the conqueror in all his glory, pure propaganda. Goya on the other hand has dared to stray from this ideal. Here is the King, beneath all the sashes and orders, portrayed with the disturbingly gentle, even slightly stupefied look of one born to be king but at heart an ordinary, a *very* ordinary, man. Likewise his family, bejewelled and besilked, but beyond the trappings perhaps not an obviously happy lot. One is reminded of the opening lines of Anna Karenina, that "All happy families are alike, but all unhappy families are unhappy in their own unique way". This portrait has a depth of penetration and a tendency to direct the perception of the viewer beyond the reality of rank and image to perhaps a more important reality. Less glamorous than the David, perhaps, but in these respects it could hardly be more different.

A comparison of these two portraits by Gainsborough is as revealing. The one on the left is among his most famous images – *The Morning Walk*, in the National Gallery. The other is a less well-known, less grand portrait of his wife. *The Morning Walk* is highly fashionable and ravishingly painted. But it tells one nothing at all about the sitters. One simply does not begin to penetrate their characters and one is reminded of the story that whenever Gainsborough's inspiration was completely worn down by the dullness of his patrons he tried to include a dog, just to give the picture some life. The portrait of his wife is in another world altogether. There is nothing fashionable here, no elegant costume and luscious landscape, and yet it is marvellously touching in the way that it addresses with great tenderness the personality of the sitter. It is a portrait, I feel, painted with great love and that love radiates from the canvas.

Let us turn now to Piero's *Baptism*. Since about 1860 this has hung in the National Gallery in London. But it was painted in the second half of the fifteenth century for the church of St John in the artist's home town of San Sepulcro in Umbria, and remained there until it was taken to London.

Our knowledge of Piero is quite limited. He was born sometime in the second decade of the fifteenth century and, despite showing an early talent for mathematics, studied painting in Florence under Domenico Veneziano. Domenico's interest in perspective, illustrated by this small predella panel of the Annunciation in the Fitzwilliam Museum, made him the ideal master and was an influence that remained crucial throughout his life. Apart from an early commission executed in Rome for Pope Nicholas V, most of Piero's career was spent in Tuscany and Umbria, working for ecclesiastical and princely patrons, most notably Duke Frederigo da Montefeltro in Urbino. By about 1460 he had apparently completely lost his sight and from then until the end of his long life in 1493 he lived in San Sepulcro, devoting himself to mathematics and the theory of perspective.

But what of the *Baptism*? One's first impression on looking at it is of extraordinary clarity and directness. For religious art in the Middle Ages and Renaissance this was of great importance. The great intellectual advances of the fifteenth century should not allow us to forget that outside elite scholarly circles, the period remained one of almost universal illiteracy. It was thus one of the artist's chief tasks to 'tell the story' so that it would be a readily intelligible substitute for the written word.

Piero's approach to the Biblical account is literal, and the moment he has chosen to show, with St John in the act of baptising Christ, he bringing his hands together in prayer, while the dove hovers above his head, is sufficiently specific to show that it is clearly St Luke's gospel that he has in mind. He has taken enormous pains to represent every detail from the gospel that could be shown visually and has included hardly any element superfluous to it.

Almost every detail has a specific narrative role to play: the figure to the right in the middle ground, struggling with his shirt, shows Christ's baptism not to have been an isolated event, but one of a series; the presence of the strangely dressed figures in the background who that the event was not conducted in secret, but was observed by the hostile Pharisees, while the gesturing arm of one of them testifies to the physical 'bodily form' of the dove. I was at first puzzled by the odd area of tree trunks in the middle ground to the left of Christ, until I realised that this must refer to the passage in the gospel in which the Baptist says, "Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire".

The artist has done more than simply set the story before us: he acts as a guide to it and interpreter of it. The construction of the picture draws the eye directly to the core of narrative, to the act of baptism itself. The strange ambiguity of the term 'bodily form' is reflected in the mysterious haunting appearance of the dove that is real (in many ways the most real thing in the picture), and yet unnaturally white and radiant, difficult even to locate in the picture space (although we know it must be above the head of Christ), as if it were an apparition rather than a physical reality. But this is only the beginning of the process by which the artist has transcended the matter-of-fact level of narrative and has painted what amounts to a profound and sophisticated commentary on the significance of the event for him and his world.

He does this on several different levels and, of course, he could not have expected all of these to have been equally intelligible to all viewers of the picture. For the peasant the story is probably enough, and he will be the first to recognise in the face of Christ a look of seriousness and solemnity that tokens a moment of the utmost importance; for the educated observer of the time there is perhaps more. The important thing is that there is no way in which the subtler levels of meaning are allowed to obscure the clarity of the more basic.

In the first place, the artist has contrived to depict the scene with an intensity that somehow transcends the world of everyday experience. This is in part achieved through the strange quality of

stillness that has often been remarked in Piero's paintings. Even motion (paradoxically enough) seems stilled (take the man struggling with his shirt, for example, or the water pouring from the bowl onto Christ's head), and in the Baptism this extraordinary aspect is made to reflect, as it were on the nature of the event, by investing it with a sense of timelessness. It is as if the clock has stopped and although it is obviously not intended to suggest that the event *lasted* forever, the implication is that it is somehow *valid* forever. That is complicated by the setting of the picture in which the distant town can be identified quite specifically as San Sepulcro, seen from the west. It was, of course, entirely conventional for artists to represent Biblical events in contemporary, obviously Italian settings, but here it is all so specific, and would have been so clear to anyone seeing it in its original location, that it seems to imply that if the Baptism had any significance at all, it was by virtue of something that was still equally valid in his own day as when it took place.

This quality of stillness is important and self-evident. And yet the means by which it has been achieved are not so obvious. Four connected elements contribute to it, each adding further layers to the meaning of the picture. Most obviously, the principal figures themselves seem oddly bloodless and pale, more like painted wood statues than living human beings; their actual physical balance, moreover, is so poised that one can almost see them staying where they are forever. Equally, there is a remarkable balance in the colours of the picture. If you compare Piero's paintings with those of almost any other Italian artist of the fifteenth century, you will immediately be struck by the 'coolness' of his palette. There is an almost unnatural sense of balance between all the tones of the colours, resulting in an extraordinary, dream-like evenness of intensity throughout the composition that, when combined with the physical balance of the figures, makes the whole effect one of the extraordinary calm, almost slow motion and silence.

Another element contributing to this overall effect and which does not seem somehow quite right, or quite natural, is the light. If you look carefully there is, in fact, something quite wrong here. The shadows which are cast, such as that under Christ's left arm, show quite clearly that the principal source of light is to the right of the picture, at about 45°. In other words, the sun is shining from the south and it must be about eleven o'clock in the morning. That is all fine, except for the odd fact that the light is apparently far paler than it ought to be for a clear Italian mid-morning in early summer. The only possibly explanation for this is a secondary light source to soften the shadows cast by the sun, and the only source that could do that without casting shadows of its own is one from directly above. You will recall that Piero has been at pains to represent everything from the gospel account that could be shown visually. But one of the most important verses in the story could hardly be shown visually at all. "And a voice came from heaven, 'Thou art my beloved Son, with thee I am well pleased'". How Piero copes with this problem of representing the senior member of the Trinity, as it were, is by suggesting his presence as light. The dove itself seems to have a radiance of its own, but not enough to account for the extra light that diffuses the picture. This unseen presence is confirmed by an area of barely visible gold rays which you may perhaps be able to see coming from much higher in the picture.

A more important, though less immediately obvious contributor to the atmosphere of the picture is its geometric construction. I am not talking here of perspective, but of the way in which the surface pattern of the picture is organised. The essentials of this construction are quite clear. The central vertical passing through Christ's head, hands and down to his feet; also the two horizontals passing through the wings of the dove and the line formed by the hands of St John and the angels and the upper border of Christ's loin cloth, which divide the picture into three equal sections. You might even be able to detect the triangle formed by Christ's upper arms and leading the eye up to the head of the dove. But the full extent to which the design has been conditioned by geometry is more complicated and looks something like this.

It seems odd that Piero should have gone to such trouble to produce this carefully worked out matrix, and one is left wondering if it was done merely out of intellectual self-indulgence, or whether there was, perhaps, some more serious purpose behind it. On one level we have seen immediately what effect it has on the way we see the picture: its system of triangles draws the eye to the crucial area of the picture, and the principal horizontal and vertical dimensions lend it an overall clarity. But the complexity of the scheme suggests that there is more to it than this.

We have noted before Piero's strong interest in mathematics; he also lived in a world in which scholars were fast rediscovering the culture and philosophy of the ancient world. An important development during this period was the re-emergence of Plato, whose reputation during the Middle Ages had been eclipsed by Aristotle. Neo-Platonists evolved a system in which mathematics, as an idea, played a very important role. What I mean by this *idea*, and why it was thought interesting is roughly this: most of the things we know we know through perception, because we have seen them, heard them or felt them. This gives such knowledge a status rather less than absolute certainty; since we all know we can from time to time be deceived by our senses, how do we know for sure when to trust them? The Church taught that the truths of religion were of a different order, since man was acquainted with them by divine revelation and they could, therefore, be taken as certain. Philosophers recognised in the truths of mathematics something analogous to the truths of religion. For just as we know one through revelation, we know the other through reason and both are equally independent of perception.

Put another way, the truths of mathematics would continue to be so even if the world ceased to exist. It would continue to be truth that two plus two would equal four even if two or four objects did not exist or never had existed. This gives mathematical truths a sort of 'perfection' that makes them very like the truths of theology. God and the Trinity would continue to exist or be 'true' even if the world did not exist, since they existed before it and independently of it anyway. And since the *Baptism* is the great moment when the 'truth' of the Trinity was revealed to the world, it would have seemed fitting to the scholarly Renaissance mind that this should be reflected in a sort of mathematical or geometrical harmony. What Piero is doing here, by structuring the picture in this way, is to make what would have been perceived as a perfectly proper commentary on the eternal and 'perfect' nature of the Trinity, according to the respectable philosophical beliefs of the time.

There is still one unexplained detail, and I have left it until last because in many ways it sums up the picture and points the way to how it should be looked at. I have said that Piero has been both thorough and economical in his handling of the gospel: every detail from the story has its counterpart in the picture and this concern for accuracy makes it reasonable to suppose that anything in the picture that is superfluous to the gospel is presumably there for a reason.

One such addition, and a very conspicuous one it is too, is the group of three angelic figures to the left. And what strange figures they are. They are in fact typical of Piero's tendency to take a convention of the time and use it in a way that is both novel and profound. And it was quite usual at the time to include angels in pictures of the Baptism. They are normally referred to as witnesses. But look at these a little more closely and they turn out to be something else altogether, or rather, something else in addition. In fact, they must be the Three Graces; the sisterly likeness between them and the distinctive headdress of each, the laurel wreath, the rose garland and the jewel, make it impossible for them to be meant as anything else. Invariably elsewhere they are shown dancing hand in hand in a circle as, for example, in Botticelli's *Primavera*. But here they are at rest, gazing abstractedly, almost disinterestedly, at the great event taking place before them. Now there are several things here. First, only two of them are actually looking at the Baptism, the third is staring out of the picture, at *us*. That has the effect of drawing us into it, and that is very important since it is the only contact we have, the main participants showing no awareness at all of the world beyond the picture. And yet, and this is the second point, these three angels are themselves separated from

the rest of the picture by that solid pillar-like tree that comes between them and the main events. They occupy, as it were, a different world and the others seem no more aware of them than they are of us. And that suggests that we should look upon them as in some way a commentary on the rest of the picture. The scholarly contemporary would have known the current theories about the Three Graces and would have been able to apply them to the picture. And that most widely accepted then was the one expounded by Seneca in the 2nd Century A.D. He said the Three Graces stand for the idea of reciprocal grace, which consisted in the offering, accepting and returning of benefits. The theory is that there is a sort of eternal triangular relationship between them that is mutually enhancing. In having love shown towards me, I become more receptive to it, I become, as it were, moulded by it and better able to return it to others. Now this, of course, is just how we can view the central importance of Christ's life and death for us: that by accepting the sacrifice or gift made by Christ for us we cannot but develop and increase that degree of love that informs our own lives. I cannot prove it, but it seems to me that that is the most likely explanation of the presence of these strange half-Christian, half-Pagan figures, and they serve to sum up what we imagine was for Piero, at the heart of the incarnation.

This is, then, a deeply theological painting. And that theology is part of its spirituality too. But for me the essence of its spiritual value is much simpler. It is the way it confronts its viewer and holds him with a gaze and a sense of stillness that suggests that, for a moment, the whole world has been stilled.

My second work is also religious, though perhaps less overtly so: Henry Moore's Madonna and Child from St Matthew's church in Northampton. I choose it not only because it 'will do very well', but because it would be inappropriate *not* to discuss it in the context of a lecture in memory of Walter Hussey. Canon Hussey, as many of you will know, was vicar of St Matthew's from 1937 until 1955, when he was appointed Dean of Chichester. Throughout his life he was deeply interested in the arts – all the arts – and it is undoubtedly what he will be best remembered for that he succeeded in persuading many of the most outstanding and serious artists of his day to accept commissions for major new works for the church. He believed passionately in the role of the Church as patron and in the importance of the finest works of art made through such a collaboration. He also felt – surely rightly – that this was a role that the Church had long lost sight of. The list of artists he commissioned during his tenure at Northampton and Chichester is impressive: Henry Moore, Graham Sutherland, John Piper and Marc Chagall in the visual arts, Benjamin Britten, William Walton, Michael Tippett and Leonard Bernstein in music. Even W.H. Auden was persuaded to write a litany for St Matthew's.

Henry Moore's Madonna was commissioned in the winter of 1942-43 when Moore was not at all the household name he was later to become. Hussey had seen some of his drawings on view at the National Gallery. They showed groups of people sheltering in the underground during air raids and Hussey was struck, as he put it, by "their majestic dignity", "a dignity and three-dimensional quality [which] seemed to make anything that was unfortunate enough to be hanging near them appear flat and dull". Hussey approached Moore and the story of the evolution of the commission from initial tentative discussions to the placing of the finished statue is thoroughly documented in Hussey's autobiographical book *Patron of Art*.

We have the advantage, denied us in looking at most older works of art, of being able to see this statue not only through our own eyes, but through a clear knowledge of the artist's own intentions. The sculpture was to be placed in the North transept of the church and Moore developed the basic composition to take account of the fact that it would be seen initially as one entered the West end. His intention was that your eye be caught first by the Madonna, transferring to the Christ child only as you approach closer.

Hussey, Kenneth Clark (who unveiled the sculpture), and to an extent Moore himself, were all concerned lest the sculpture might actually shock people through its modernity. In his address, at the unveiling in February 1944 Clark cautioned “the figure which I have the honour to unveil in a moment may worry some simple people, it may raise indignation in the minds of self-centred people, and it may lead arrogant people to protest. But I am sure there will be many people in this building, who do not pretend to any great familiarity with this arts in general or with the modern idioms of art, who will feel every day more and more the fundamental beauty of this figure”. Such is the way in which these idioms are gradually absorbed by society, I am sure very few people today would feel, or even understand, the sense of outrage with which the statue was quite widely greeted at the time. Our passage towards feeling this ‘fundamental beauty’ is much quicker now than it would have been nearly fifty years ago. And yet it is still true and I felt it strongly myself when I went to Northampton to see the statue, that one’s first reactions are far shallower and less affecting than the impressions that gradually mould themselves through simply and quietly looking at it over a quarter of an hour or so. And what emerges with gathering force as one gradually takes in the work is, above all, a sense of repose, of dignity and of a sort of primitive strength in the relationship between mother and child. Moore, as I hinted above, has carefully controlled our response to the figure by drawing the eye first to the mother, to the child as we come nearer, and finally to the relationship between the two as we become aware of the way she protects the child with her right hand while gently holding his hands in her left. A sense of universality is suggested through the way in which the composition stands, as it were, on the threshold of naturalism and minimalism: the figures are sufficiently formed to be immediately recognisable for what they are, but in being completely devoid of individual features, become also symbols of the idea of motherhood. This sense of the symbolic is, I think, largely formed through the artist’s use of basic volumes to construct the figure: spheres, cylinders, cubes and so on.

As to what one might wish to term the spiritual qualities of the work, I can do no better than quote the words of both artist and patron in discussing it. From the outset Moore was clearly aware of the religious dimension of the commission. Hussey asked him whether he would *believe* in the subject and he replied: “Yes, I would. Though whether or not I should agree with your theology, I just do not know. I think it is only through our art that we artists can come to understand your theology”. Later on, when the carving was well under way, Moore wrote to Hussey that he had begun “by considering in what ways a Madonna and Child differs from a carving of just a ‘Mother and Child’ – that is by considering how in my opinion religious art differs from secular art”. He went on to say that “It’s not easy to describe in words what this difference is, except by saying in general terms that the ‘Madonna and Child’ should have an austerity and a nobility and some touch of grandeur (even hieratic aloofness) which is missing in the ‘everyday’ ‘Mother and Child’ idea”. He had tried, he said, to invest the statute with “a quiet dignity and gentleness, [with] a sense of complete easiness and repose, as though the Madonna could stay in the position for ever, which” he joked, “being in stone she will have to do”.

In February 1944, with the statue in position but not yet unveiled, Hussey preached a sermon on it, some of which I should like to quote directly here:

“The Holy Child is the centre of the work, and yet the subject speaks of the Incarnation – the fact that the Christ was born of a human mother – and so the Blessed Virgin is conceived as any small child would in essence think of his moth, not as small and frail, but as the one large, secure, solid background to life. There is pictured humanity at its highest dignity; there is symbolized all that is best in motherhood as it appears to a small child. The Holy Child sits safely in His mother’s lap, with her protecting hands on Him; but He looks out quite unafraid, and her hands do not grip Him, for she presents Him, offers Him to the world, as He will offer Himself.

“No feature of the statue” the sermon continues, “cost the sculptor more thought than the face of the Holy Child. Many of the ancient Christian artists sought to give character to the Christ Child by carving or painting the face of an adult man in miniature ... but that course, it was felt by the sculptor, destroyed the idea of the child. On the other hand the face could not be that of just any child (as has all too often been the case with many recent works) because He was not just ‘any child’. Henry Moore has sought to make the face that of a child, yet such a child as ‘could be imagined to grow up into all that we know the Christ to be’.”

There is theology here, then, and serious theology too. But it is not its expository aspects that make the figure spiritual. Rather it is its tendency to turn our thoughts to these doctrines through evoking this sense of dignity, nobility, repose and so on that its spiritual – and moral – strength lies. For it seems to me – and I hope you will not dismiss this as mere woolly wishfulness – that the very contemplation of such qualities makes us, if only momentarily, better people. In this sense such works are both more and less than theology – they are a practical application of it. I remind you of Moore’s own words on the commission – “I think it is only through our art that we artists can come to understand your theology”. Perhaps one might add to that that it is very largely through such art that many of us come to *feel* the theology. By ennobling an image that is on one level of quite unremarkable ordinariness, the artist channels our thoughts and, in a way, ennoble us too.

It is with this notion of the ennoblement of the ordinary that I come to my third, and perhaps least obvious, work of art – in fact *two* – *Still lifes*, by Juan Sanchez Cotan. Cotan is one of the less well-known Spanish artists of the early seventeenth century. He was born near Toledo in 1561 and trained under one Blas de Prado, an artist who specialised in this type of still-life painting. In 1604 he became a Carthusian monk and his most famous paintings, done about ten years before his death, are his cycle of the life of St Bruno, painted for the Carthusian monastery of Granada between 1615 and 1617.

The Spain in which he lived, which had been the most powerful country in Europe during the early sixteenth century, was by the latter part of the century coming under increasing political and economic pressures. Everything, it seemed, was conspiring to drive the country down. The empire in Mexico and Peru, at first a staggering source of wealth, was increasingly becoming an administrative morass. The supply of precious metal that had flooded into Spain and made it rich was fast drying up. Plague and famines at home exerted one kind of pressure, while inflation, declining overseas markets and consequent widespread unemployment, aggravated by high taxation, exerted another.

It was, you might suppose, exactly the sort of fertile soil in which intense popular religion would flourish. In Spain this was even more so because of the almost theocratic nature of the State, in which all policies from doctrinal to financial were closely involved with Church interests. During the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries there was an unparalleled expansion in the monastic population of the country – far greater, in fact, than the country could economically have hoped to support – and an extraordinary flourishing of religious genius in the persons of mystics such as St Teresa of Avila, St John of the Cross, and St Peter of Alcantara.

The artistic genre represented by these pictures is known as *Bodegones*, after the Spanish *Bodegon*, meaning tavern. Typically they take the form of kitchen scenes in which still life predominates. Perhaps the most famous are Velasquez’s pictures in London and Edinburgh of Christ in the House of Martha and Mary and an Old Woman Cooking Eggs. I show the Edinburgh picture here. The notional subject matter is quite incidental and the real subject is in fact the still life elements in the foreground. The different surfaces and textures of the ceramic and metal vessels, the wooden spoon, the broken eggs and the egg shells have all be expressed with an intensity of observation that is uncanny.

The other great master of the Bodegones style was Francisco de Zurbaran whose still lifes of utterly ordinary domestic vessels have an almost reverential quality about them. But Cotan's work in this manner was earlier than either and has an intensity that I believe surpasses both Velasquez and Zurbaran. The objects he has chosen are of an ordinariness and, quite literally, a mundanity that would probably have been taken as much for granted by Cotan's contemporaries as they are by us. They are not even artefacts. Yet the way they have been placed, on an austere open ledge, isolated against an utterly black void and lit with an unnaturally even and cool light concentrates the mind on the objects themselves. This sense of austerity is enhanced by the very rudimentary geometric arrangement of the things – in a simple crescent in one case and two horizontals in the other. This presentation differs totally from that of the other great school of seventeenth-century still life paintings, namely the Dutch. There paintings such as Pieter Claesz's *Still life with Nautilus Shell* took the form of elegantly composed arrangements of objects, both natural and artificial, designed to show the virtuosity of the artist but also to illustrate, so it is always said, the vanity of material possessions. But whereas there is a transient quality to most Dutch still life paintings – still indeed, but with a sense of having just been placed and sometimes with a sense of slight preciousness too – with Cotan's picture this stillness has, I feel, almost a sense of timelessness.

It might be objected that while it is perfectly valid to talk of an austerity and contemplativeness about Cotan's picture, there is no sense in which one can usefully talk of a picture of a cabbage and a stick of celery as spiritual. And yet I feel quite certain that this is precisely the intention of the artist and, in fact, the nature of our response to them, if we pay them any serious attention. Cotan's younger contemporary, George Herbert, wrote "Teach me, my God and King, in all things thee to see". Nearer to his home and with words that Cotan may have known, St Teresa of Avila wrote that "God may be found among the cooking pots". It is as a reverential homage to the created world that I feel the artist intended his picture to be seen. No doubt we are – and should be – impressed by the skill with which the illusion of real vegetables in real space has been achieved, but perhaps more important is the way in which the artist has seen and made us look at the objects themselves, as something somehow extraordinary and wonderful – much in the way that a greater performance of a familiar piece of music will make one hear it as if for the first time, with an overwhelming sense of revelation. And just as in the Baptism the depiction of the event points beyond itself to something greater, just as Moore's sculpture becomes something beyond a mother and child, so these humble vegetables, in our guided contemplation of them, transcend their ordinariness and become a symbol of the God who made them.

I should like to end much where I began, with the third of my three questions: 'is there any special sense in which art expresses or illuminates the notion of spirituality?'. I have restricted the discussion to objective art and focused on the way in which, at its most profound, it can somehow transcend the immediate level of its subject, can ennoble the ordinary (while not depriving it of its essential ordinariness) and can, as it were, universalise the individual and specific nature of what it depicts. Put more basically, the work of art can show a baptism, a mother and child or a cabbage, and yet address through that subject much wider and deeper issues.

I mentioned at the beginning of this lecture Wassily Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. It is a strange work, containing arguments and statements that are on occasion difficult to take – remarks such as "In the hierarchy of colours green is the 'bourgeoisie' – self-satisfied, immovable, narrow". And yet it is a work that also contains flashes of valuable insights. Kandinsky believed that the most important role of the artist was to express the inner life of the soul. He chose to substantiate this by a quotation – "to send light into the darkness of men's hearts such is the duty of the artist" and that quotation was not from an a painter, but a composer, Robert Schumann.

Kandinsky believed that art – painting – aspires to the condition of music and wrote that “with few exceptions music has been for some centuries the art which has devoted itself not to the reproduction of natural phenomena, but rather to the expression of the artist’s soul”. Yet although he was to become himself a leader of the abstract expressionist school of painting, he did not believe that only art which aspired to the abstract was valid. Far from it; he speaks of the Italian nineteenth-century artist Giovanni Segantini as always selecting “the most ordinary objects ... but he never failed to create a spiritual as well as a material value”. What he means by this is perhaps illuminated to an extent by what he says of Cezanne, that he “made a living thing out of a teacup, or rather in a teacup he realised the existence of something alive. He raised still life to such a point that it ceased to be inanimate”. “These men” he added, “sought for the ‘inner’ by way of the ‘outer’”.

It is, I believe, this sense of the inner reality of the world that painters and sculptors can convey in a unique and special way. Music, as Kandinsky reminds us, is the most ‘inward’ or abstract of the arts, but it is so abstracted as to be almost a world of its own. Literature, of course, has the power to lead beyond narrative too, but it directs the reader to specific thoughts, or, in the case of drama, moves the audience at a predetermined pace from scene to scene, because the performance lasts a fixed time. Only the visual arts have this contemplative quality that allows the mind and eye to range across the picture or sculpture taking in what it will, as it can, and allowing the mind gradually to absorb and extend from the specific to the general, from the ordinary to the spiritual. In *a* baptism we start to see a whole theology; in *a* mother and child we begin to perceive a powerful symbolism and in a leggy cabbage we begin to sense a reverence for the created world. This is, as William Blake put it in *Auguries of Innocence*,

“To see a World in a Grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower.”
