

ABSTRACT

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PAINTING: RACE, RELIGION, AND
AESTHETICS IN THE ART OF EMIL
BISTRAM, RAYMOND JONSON, AND
AGNES PELTON

Nathan K. Rees, Doctor of Philosophy, 2010

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Three core artists of the Transcendental Painting Group, Emil Bisttram (1895-1976), Raymond Jonson (1891-1982), and Agnes Pelton (1881-1961), employed modernist painting styles in an attempt to create spiritually significant art. Although previous scholarship has focused on the artists' formal innovations, their work was imbricated in contemporary cultural politics, actively participating in discourses surrounding conceptions of race, religion, aesthetics, and the interrelation of each of these realms. Each drew from sources in metaphysical religious literature, especially Theosophy and related traditions. Their theories of ideal aesthetics for religious art, based on the supposition that artists could convey direct emotional experience through

abstraction, reflected the Theosophical drive to overcome materialist philosophy by transcending the limits of physicality.

Bisttram, Pelton, and Jonson also internalized Theosophy's promotion of syncretism as a guiding principle, and followed metaphysical religionists in advocating a combinative appropriation from diverse religious and artistic traditions. In particular, they relied on Theosophical conceptions of the importance of gleaning allegedly ancient wisdom as they addressed American Indian cultures of the Southwest. Their art created a hybrid iconography, combining symbolic elements from metaphysical religious sources with imagery derived from Southwest Indian cultures, asserting an integral relationship between the two, and advancing the perceived agreement between Native American and Theosophical religious systems as evidence of the truth of the latter. In addition to expressing metaphysical interpretations of Native American religions in their work, they promoted a transcultural aesthetic that posited American Indian art as an archaic and therefore "authentic" means of expressing of spiritual wisdom; they modeled their own abstract aesthetics in response to their encounters with Indian art.

As they appropriated from Native American sources, they created images that celebrated the indigenous peoples of the Southwest as possessing unique and important religious knowledge. Their intent, however, was to advance Western culture forward by drawing from ancient sources to create a new, synthetic religion. The result was an art that referenced American Indian cultural practices and art traditions, but gave no voice to the original Native American artists, claiming to transcend the sphere of cultural significance and approach the level of "universal" meaning.

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By

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Table of contents

Chapter One	Introduction	1
	The Artists of the Transcendental Painting Group	4
	Approaches to Religion in the Transcendental Painting Group.....	13
	Scholarship on Religion in the Art of the Transcendental Painting Group	21
	Theorizing Primitivism	27
	Politics of Representation in the Art of the Transcendental Painting Group.....	33
	Terminology.....	37
	The Transcendental Painting Group and Primitivism.....	40
	Organization of the Dissertation	51
Chapter Two	Agnes Pelton and the Indians of the Southwest: Ancient Wisdom and Modern Expression	54
	Synthetic Art and Synthetic Religion	55
	Shambhala in the Southwest	64
	Past and Future: Ancient Ruins in Pelton’s Abstract Paintings.....	69
	“Cultural Evolution” in Science and Theosophy	73
	Turning from East to West: Cultural Evolution in America.....	78
	Native Americans as Remnants of the Fourth Root Race.....	86
	Pelton’s Religious Aesthetic	104
	Where “Deep Streams Flow, Endlessly Renewing”	115
Chapter Three	Emil Bisttram: the Art of Creative Synthesis	133
	Sources of Bisttram’s Art and Religion	137
	Metaphysical Symbolism in Bisttram’s Depictions of Indian Dances	144
	Bisttram’s Vanishing Indians.....	153
	Finding Metaphysical Meaning in Native American Ceremonial Dance.....	157
	Religious Art of the New Age	164
	Natural Symbolism	169
	Hegemonic Syncretism	179
Chapter Four	Indian Abstraction and “Absolute Painting” in Raymond Jonson’s Religious Aesthetic	183
	Finding Religion, Finding Abstraction	186
	Native American Sources in Jonson’s Art.....	191
	Expressing Spirituality through Abstraction.....	211
	“Absolute Painting”	214
	Native American Art and Absolute Painting	223
	“The Esoteric and Spiritual in Painting”	228
	Pictographical Compositions	234
	The Politics of Synthesis in Jonson’s Work	248
Chapter Five	Conclusion.....	250
	Bibliography	298

List of Figures

- Figure 1. Agnes Pelton, *California Landscape near Pasadena*, 1930. John Irvine Smith Fine Arts.
- Figure 2. Agnes Pelton, *Future*, 1941. The Buck Collection, Laguna Beach, CA.
- Figure 3. Edward Curtis, “Remains of Ancient Fish-Pounds.” From *The North American Indian*, 1924.
- Figure 4. Agnes Pelton, sketch from a letter to Jane Levington Comfort, 24 Aug., 1933. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
- Figure 5. Agnes Pelton, *Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*, c. 1940. Private Collection.
- Figure 6. Unknown photographer, “Arthur Dow Summer School at Emerson House,” c. 1900. Ipswich Historical Society; reprinted in Hutchinson, *The Indian Craze*, 112.
- Figure 7. Agnes Pelton, *Evensong*, 1934. Collection of LeighAnne Stainer, Fremont, CA.
- Figure 8. Agnes Pelton, *Stargazer*, 1929. Private Collection.
- Figure 9. Agnes Pelton, *Mother of Silence*, 1933. Mary Vigil Collection.
- Figure 10. Emil Bisttram, *Pueblo Woman*, c. 1930. Robert L. Parsons Fine Art, Santa Fe.
- Figure 11. Emil Bisttram, *Hopi Indian Snake Dance*, 1933. Peters Corporation Collection, Santa Fe.
- Figure 12. Jan Matulka, *Hopi Snake Dance No. 2*, 1918. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
- Figure 13. Emil Bisttram, *Eagle Dance*, 1934. Anschutz Collection, Denver.
- Figure 14. Awa Tsireh (Alfonso Roybal), *Eagle Dancers*, 1917-1925. Smithsonian American Art Museum.
- Figure 15. John Sloan, *Eagle Dance*, 1919. Collection of Frank C. Osborne.
- Figure 16. Emil Bisttram, *Time Cycle*, 1940. Collection of Herbert S. Adler, Scarsdale, NY.
- Figure 17. Emil Bisttram, *Atonement*, 1965. Collection of Thom and Annette Andriola, Houston.
- Figure 18. Emil Bisttram, *Domingo Chorus*, 1936. Richard York Gallery, New York.

- Figure 19. Maynard Dixon, *Earth Knower*, 1931. Oakland Museum, Oakland, CA.
- Figure 20. Emil Bisttram, *Taos Pueblo*, 1969. Eiteljorg Museum of the American Indian and Western Art, Indianapolis.
- Figure 21. Emil Bisttram, *Suspension*, 1936. Anschutz Collection, Denver.
- Figure 22. Nicholas Roerich, *Drops of Life*, 1924. Nicholas Roerich Museum, New York.
- Figure 23. Raymond Jonson, *Southwest Arrangement*, 1933. Jonson Gallery of the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.
- Figure 24. Raymond Jonson, *Cliff Dwellings No. 3*, 1928. Jonson Gallery of the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.
- Figure 25. Raymond Jonson, *Cliff Dwellings No. 1*, 1926. Jonson Gallery of the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.
- Figure 26. Tyuonyi Pueblo at Bandelier National Monument. Photo by Nathan Rees.
- Figure 27. Ashiwi Polychrome Jar, c. 1730. Reproduced in Frank and Harlow, *Historic Pottery of the Pueblo Indians*, 139.
- Figure 28. Agnes Pelton, *Wells of Jade*, 1931. Jonson Gallery of the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.
- Figure 29. Nicholas Roerich, *Madonna Oriflamma*, 1932. Nicholas Roerich Museum, New York.
- Figure 30. Raymond Jonson, *Pictographical Composition No. 7*, 1946. Jonson Gallery of the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.
- Figure 31. Mimbres Period Bowl. Maxwell Museum of Anthropology, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.
- Figure 32. Raymond Jonson, *Pictographical Composition No. 3*, 1946. Peyton Wright Gallery, Santa Fe.
- Figure 33. Petroglyph, Petroglyph National Monument, Albuquerque.
- Figure 34. Petroglyph, Petroglyph National Monument, Albuquerque.
- Figure 35. Raymond Jonson, *Pictographical Composition No. 9*, 1946. Jonson Gallery of the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.

Figure 36. Raymond Jonson, *Pictographical Composition No. 12*, 1947. Heritage Gallery, Dallas.

Figure 37. Petroglyph, Petroglyph National Monument, Albuquerque.

Figure 38. Raymond Jonson, *Pictographical Composition No. 17*, 1947. Peyton Wright Gallery, Santa Fe.

Figure 39. Adolph Gottlieb, *Pictograph-Symbol*, 1942. Adolph and Ester Gottlieb Foundation, New York.

Figure 40. Petroglyph, Petroglyph National Monument, Albuquerque.

Figure 41. Petroglyph, Petroglyph National Monument, Albuquerque.

Chapter One

Introduction

In 1938, nine artists organized the Transcendental Painting Group, announcing their intent “to carry painting beyond the appearance of the physical world, through new concepts of space, color, light and design, to imaginative realms that are idealistic and spiritual.”¹ Based in northern New Mexico, the group grew to include a tenth official member, and initiated several exhibitions, before it gradually dissolved after the onset of the Second World War.² Though the Transcendental Painting Group was active for less than four years, three of participating artists were among the best recognized proponents of modernism in the American Southwest: Emil Bisttram (1895-1976), Raymond Jonson (1891-1982), and Agnes Pelton (1881-1961). Their organization was too short-lived to achieve its loftiest goals, but it advanced the cultural saliency of abstract art in the West, boosted the careers of a number of aspiring artists, and preserved considerable documentation. As such, art historians have recognized the association as the nexus of a distinct “regional modernism” in the United States, and focused on the Transcendental Painting Group as an organizing framework for histories of all of the artists involved.

¹ Alfred Morang, *Transcendental Painting* (Santa Fe: American Foundation for Transcendental Painting, 1940), n. p.

² As Tiska Blankenship notes, though the American Foundation for Transcendental Painting was officially dissolved in October, 1942, Raymond Jonson did not consider the Transcendental Painting Group defunct until June, 1945. Nonetheless, the group had not undertaken any significant activity since 1941. See Blankenship, *Vision and Spirit: The Transcendental Painting Group* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Art Museums, 1997), 3-4.

Among the most pressing reasons for forming an organization was the hope that their collective efforts could better promote modernist painting styles, which each of the artists involved found difficult to exhibit or sell. Histories of the group have characterized the participants as idealistic supporters of modernism during the inter-war period, an era when abstraction was presumed to be on the wane, following standard accounts of American art history. Many mid and late-twentieth century observers conceived of the artists of the Transcendental Painting Group as diligent and under-appreciated activists who helped bring modernist painting to its zenith in the Abstract Expressionism of the 1940s and 50s.³

To be sure, the artists themselves sought to promote a similar interpretation of their work—their “manifesto” explicitly distanced their work from that of social realist artists, asserting that their work “does not concern itself with political, economic, or other social problems,” but with the “development and presentation of various types of non-representational painting.”⁴ Ed Garman, a member of the group who would later become one of its most influential interpreters, extended this statement to argue that their art had no relation to any other realm of culture, as evinced by the organization’s name: “Transcendental contributed a quality that went beyond temporal exigencies such as preoccupations with nationalism, religion, creed, political beliefs, race, ego, fashion, gender, or commercial commodity.” Instead, it “extended to a universal, shared sense

³ See, for example, Ed Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976).

⁴ Morang, *Transcendental Painting*. Most prominent among the numerous works explicitly concerned with “social problems” that Morang failed to note are the murals by Emil Bistram at the Taos County Courthouse, Roswell Federal Courthouse, and Department of Justice Building in Washington, D. C.; Bistram been the supervisor for the Treasury Relief Art Project in 1933-34. See Jacqueline Hoefler, *A More Abundant Life: New Deal Artists and Public Art in New Mexico* (Santa Fe: Sunstone, 2003), 64.

of values in human experience.”⁵ With few exceptions, art historians have followed Garman, recognizing the art of the Transcendental Painting Group exclusively for its formal innovations, and ignoring the cultural context in which the work was situated.

I argue for a new understanding of the work of the Transcendental Painting Group as a corpus with rich cultural significance. Garman and others have neglected the degree to which “nationalism, religion, creed, political beliefs, race, ego, fashion, gender, [and] commercial commodity” are fundamentally caught up in the formation of human values and experience. The members of the Transcendental Painting Group fashioned their interpretations of “universal” values from the multi-layered fabric of social signification, interweaving contemporary ideas about race, religion, and cultural relations throughout their art.

I focus on the three most active, core members of the group, investigating the metaphysical religious framework they constructed to frame their encounters with Native American cultures.⁶ These two realms of discourse, though usually discussed under the separate headings of religion and primitivism in art historical scholarship, frequently overlapped in their work. In fact, for Bistram, Jonson, and Pelton, Southwestern Indian ceremonialism emblemized the ideal relationship between religion and art. Though they arrived at a diverse range of interpretations, and frequently represented American Indian cultures with reference to inaccurate and even

⁵ Ed Garman, “The Ideals and Art of the Transcendental Painters,” in *Vision and Spirit*, ed. Tiska Blankenship (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Art Museums, 1997), 8.

⁶ I follow Catherine Albanese in using the term “metaphysical religion” to describe Theosophy and related traditions which members of the Transcendental Painting Group studied. The terms “esotericism” and “occultism,” both common in earlier scholarship, carry pejorative connotations, and are insufficiently inclusive. See Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: a Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 4.

racist stereotypes, they each asserted that Native American art validated their own conceptions of a religiously meaningful aesthetic. Through the appropriation of specific symbolic elements and through a broader stylistic emulation, Pelton, Bisttram, and Jonson conceived of transcendental painting as a synthesis of ancient religious art with the new forms of expression that modernism unlocked.

The Artists of the Transcendental Painting Group

Of the ten artists in the Transcendental Painting Group, four were established painters at the time of its founding. Raymond Jonson was the primary organizer, and served as the president of the Transcendental Painting Group.⁷ After beginning his career in Chicago, Jonson moved to New Mexico in 1924, where he eventually became a professor of art at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque. In 1950, he founded the Jonson Gallery on the university campus, with the goal of preserving and exhibiting the art of the Transcendental Painting Group and other artists whose ideals he considered similar.⁸

Emil Bisttram was a close associate of Jonson's in New Mexico, where Bisttram lived beginning in 1932. He opened the Taos School of Fine Arts shortly after moving to the city, where he gained notoriety as the supervisor of the Treasury Relief Art Project for New Mexico from 1933-34. He continued to teach in Taos and Los Angeles until 1965.⁹

⁷ Blankenship, 3-4.

⁸ See Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*, 2-5. The Jonson Gallery was originally housed in a building designed by John Gaw Meem that also served as Jonson's residence. In 2009, the Jonson gallery moved to the UNM art museum.

⁹ See Walt Wiggins, *The Transcendental Art of Emil Bisttram* (Taos, NM: Harwood Museum, 1988).

Agnes Pelton was the oldest member of the organization. She had exhibited at the Armory Show in 1913, as well as in numerous other group and individual exhibitions, and was widely recognized both for her desert landscapes and for her abstractions.¹⁰ A resident of Palm Springs, CA, since 1932, her ties to the Southwest and her interest in religious art suggested her to Jonson and Bisttram as an ideal participant in their project. All three had known each other since the early 1930s; they traveled in similar circles and were aware of each others' work prior to meeting in person.¹¹ Pelton was unable to travel to New Mexico, but enthusiastically participated in the group's activities through correspondence.¹²

Lawren Harris (1885-1970) became friends with Jonson after a chance meeting in Santa Fe, and agreed to join the Transcendental Painting Group; Harris was an active Theosophist and served at one time as the vice president of the Toronto Theosophical Society.¹³ He was a member of the Group of Seven, a leading proponent of modernism

¹⁰ Michael Zakian, *Agnes Pelton, Poet of Nature* (Palm Springs, CA: Palm Springs Desert Museum, 1995), 11-12; see 119-123 in the same volume for a chronology listing Pelton's major exhibitions.

¹¹ Bisttram met Pelton prior to 1933; see Bisttram to Jonson, 27 Sept., 1933, Raymond Jonson Archives. The Delphic Gallery in New York, which supported numerous artists with metaphysical interests, exhibited Jonson in 1931, and both Pelton and Bisttram, separately, in 1932; see Rudhyar, *The Transcendental Movement in Painting*, Raymond Jonson Archives. Pelton and Jonson exhibited together at the Museum of New Mexico in Santa Fe in 1933, and they met in person, after corresponding for several years, when Jonson and his wife traveled to California in 1935; see Dane Rudhyar, *An Exhibition of Paintings by Agnes Pelton, Drawings by Raymond Jonson, and Watercolors by Cady Wells* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico, 1933), and Jonson to Pelton, 28 Nov., 1935, Raymond Jonson Archives.

¹² Although Pelton wished to travel to New Mexico to meet with the other members of the Transcendental Painting Group, the organization disbanded before she had the opportunity, and health concerns prevented later visits. See Pelton to Jonson, 8 May, 1939; Jonson to Pelton, 2 Jun., 1942, Raymond Jonson Archives.

¹³ Garman, "The Ideals and Art of the Transcendental Painters," 19. Jonson described meeting Harris in 1938 on the street outside his home in Santa Fe in a letter to Peter Larisey, who was conducting research on Lawrence. See Jonson to Larisey, 14 Nov., 1973, Raymond Jonson Archives.

in Canada, and already a very well recognized artist.¹⁴ He moved to the United States in 1934, but returned to Canada after the outbreak of the Second World War, ending his association with the Transcendental Painting Group before he could participate in any meaningful way.¹⁵

Despite his interest in the relationship between Theosophy and art, Harris played a very limited role in the organization.¹⁶ In fact, it is not clear whether he had any significant continuing association with the group after its immediate founding; some of the early documents by Rudhyar and Morang from 1939 do not include Harris in the list of members.¹⁷ Jonson wrote in 1973 that Harris had been instrumental in forming the Transcendental Painting Group, but that he was unable to participate because he was away for nearly the entire time that the organization lasted.¹⁸ In the discussions about art, religion, and aesthetics that occupied Bistram, Jonson, and Pelton, Harris was seldom a participant. Although he shared their interest in metaphysical religion, he spent relatively little time in the Southwest, and never painted images related to the Southwest Indians.¹⁹

¹⁴ See Paul Duval's recent biography, *Lawren Harris: Where the Universe Sings* (Toronto: Cerebrus, 2010).

¹⁵ Garman, "The Ideals and Art of the Transcendental Painters," 19-20.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Dane Rudhyar, *A New Growth Proves the Fertility of the Southwest: Transcendental Painting*, unpublished manuscript, Raymond Jonson Archives, 3; Alfred Morang, "The Transcendental Painting Group: its Origins, Foundation, Ideals, and Works," *New Mexico Daily Examiner*, Aug. 21, 1938.

¹⁸ Jonson to Peter Larisey, 14 Nov., 1973, Raymond Jonson Archives.

¹⁹ Harris did produce images related to the Northwest-Coast Indians, a subject deserving of further study but beyond the bounds of this dissertation. For his influence on Emily Carr's understanding of the indigenous peoples of Canada, see Daniel Francis, "The Imaginary Indian: the Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture," in *Race and Racialization: Essential Readings*, ed. Tania Das Gupta (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2007), 237.

The five remaining artists were significantly younger and had only recently begun careers in painting; Horace Towner Pierce (1916-1958), Florence Miller Pierce (1918-2007), and Robert Gribbroek (1906-1971) were enrolled in Bisttram's Taos School of Fine Arts when the Transcendental Painting Group was founded. The three other members were aspiring young New Mexico artists who were interested in modernism. William Lumpkins (1909-2000) began associating with Bisttram and Jonson shortly before the foundation of the Transcendental Painting Group. Stuart Walker (1904-1940), a close friend of Lumpkins', was president of the Art League of New Mexico. Ed Garman (1914-2004) was the only artist who joined the Transcendental Painting Group after its initial organization.

Garman was the most active participant among the younger members of the group—Horace and Florence Pierce married and then moved to New York, Gribbroek and Lumpkins left the region when the Second World War broke out, and Stuart Walker died in 1940 after a prolonged illness.²⁰ Although Garman was drafted into the U. S. Navy in 1943 and moved to Southern California, he did maintain contact with the other painters, especially Jonson, and became one of the most influential interpreters of the Transcendental Painting Group in the late twentieth century.²¹

²⁰ Garman, *The History of the Transcendental Painting Group and the Definition of Transcendental Painting*, unpublished manuscript, Raymond Jonson Archives, 20-21, 34, 44-50. Florence Miller Pierce gained widespread recognition for her poured-plexiglass works beginning in the 1970s. See Lucy Lippard, *Florence Pierce: in Touch with Light* (Santa Fe: Smith Book Fund, 1998); Timothy Robert Rodgers, "Mapping an Internal World: The Art of Agnes Martin and Florence Miller Pierce," in *Illumination: the Paintings of Georgia O'Keeffe, Agnes Pelton, Agnes Martin, and Florence Miller Pierce*, ed. Karen Moss (London: Merrell, 2009): 89-101. For Stuart Walker, see the recent exhibition catalog from a retrospective exhibition at the Aaron Payne Gallery in Santa Fe, *Stuart Walker: a Modernist Master Revealed* (Santa Fe: Aaron Payne Fine Art, 2009). Gribbroek never exhibited after leaving New Mexico, but his background in commercial art led him to a job illustrating animated films for Disney Studios. His work in animation is briefly discussed in J. Michael Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in its Golden Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 450, 540.

²¹ Garman, "The Ideals and Art of the Transcendental Painters," 48-50.

Two of the most important figures in the history of the Transcendental Painting Group were writers and theorists who were not official members. In order to accommodate the contribution of supportive intellectuals who were not primarily visual artists, members created a parallel institution called the American Foundation for Transcendental Painting. Though Lawren Harris was its official president, Raymond Jonson, the secretary, did nearly all the organizing work for the foundation. Set up as a legal non-profit organization, the foundation was intended to provide exhibition and publication support for the artists of the Transcendental Painting Group, as well as to build a permanent exhibition space.²² Jonson eventually achieved this goal on his own by establishing the Jonson Gallery at the University of New Mexico. Though the foundation ultimately did little to garner financial support, two of its members, Alfred Morang and Dane Rudhyar, actively published accounts of the Transcendental Painting Group, and were instrumental in delineating the group's central aesthetic and philosophical themes.

Alfred Morang (1901-1958) was a moderately recognized writer when he moved to Santa Fe in 1937, and became a close associate of Jonson's, teaching creative writing at the Arsuna School of Fine Arts in Santa Fe, where Jonson taught art.²³ Morang wrote a pamphlet describing the Transcendental Painting Group and its aims, which quickly became known as the group's "manifesto."²⁴ In addition, he used his connections with

²² Blankenship, *Vision and Spirit*, 3-4.

²³ "Profile of a Legend: Alfred Morang," *The Santa Fean*, April, 1978. Morang also practiced as a painter, and operated the Morang School of Fine Arts in his home in the 1940s, though he only affiliated his writing, never his paintings, with the Transcendental Painting Group. See Walt Wiggins, *Alfred Morang: A Neglected Master* (Roswell, NM: Pintores Press, 1979).

²⁴ Morang, *Transcendental Painting*.

Santa Fe newspapers to publish a number of articles about the Transcendental Painting Group and its members.²⁵

Morang's manifesto crystallized the group members' disparate and sometimes divergent approaches into one coherent philosophical statement. His writing established an agenda for the organization and clearly influenced subsequent avenues of discussion. Morang was an active participant only during the period immediately after the group was founded, however, and was infrequently in contact with Bistram, Jonson, or Pelton afterward. This may account for the lack of scholarly interest in his contribution; in a 1996 interview, Bill Lumpkins remembered Morang only as "our voice... not a philosophical participant in the TPG—only a recorder."²⁶

Dane Rudhyar (1895-1985), by comparison, played a guiding role not only in the formation of the Transcendental Painting Group, but in its subsequent portrayal in historical accounts, right up until the time of his death. Rudhyar was a noted composer and authority on astrology when he settled in New Mexico during the early 1930s. He had spent his first summer there as a guest of Mabel Dodge Luhan. Rudhyar published more than forty books during the course of his career, including a novel, in addition to works on astrology and metaphysical philosophy.²⁷ Rudhyar claimed to have suggested the name for the Transcendental Painting Group, and was a vociferous participant in discussions about aesthetics and philosophy. Lumpkins asserted that he "tried to

²⁵ See Alfred Morang, "Abstract and Non-objective Painters, in Show at Museum, are the 'Adventurers of Art,'" *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 4 Jun., 1938; Morang, "The Transcendental Painting Group: its Origins, Foundation, Ideals, and Works," *New Mexico Daily Examiner*, 21 Aug., 1938.

²⁶ Tiska Blankenship, Interview with Bill Lumpkins, Feb. 14, 1996, Raymond Jonson Archives.

²⁷ Robert C. Hay, "Dane Rudhyar and the Transcendental Painting Group" (MA Thesis, University of Michigan, 1980), 19-30. See also, Denis Ertan, *Dane Rudhyar: his Music, Thought, and Art* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2009).

become the spiritual leader” for the group, and then “tried to fit us into a mold after the group broke apart.”²⁸

Rudhyar had a significant impact on later accounts of the Transcendental Painting Group, in part because he outlived Pelton, Bisttram, and Jonson. In addition to several articles he wrote about the group and its members, his manuscript for a book titled *The Transcendental Movement in Painting*, though never published, was among the only extended accounts available to later scholars.²⁹ Rudhyar experimented in painting and drawing during his career, and eventually considered himself on equal artistic footing as the members of the group proper—dealer Martin Diamond, who helped organize the first major retrospective of the Transcendental Painting Group, in 1982 at the University of New Mexico, was actually unable to keep Rudhyar from exhibiting his own work alongside the group members’. Rudhyar came to consider himself a member of the Transcendental Painting Group and managed to convince the show’s curators that his work should be included.³⁰

Rudhyar did, in fact, play a much more significant role in the Transcendental Painting Group than many of the original members of the actual group. After the dissolution of the organization, Rudhyar continued to write about art and aesthetics, and frequently lauded Pelton, Jonson, and Bisttram.³¹ His letters evince that he kept in close

²⁸ Tiska Blankenship, interview with Bill Lumpkins, Raymond Jonson Archives.

²⁹ Dane Rudhyar, *The Transcendental Movement in Painting*. The hand-written original is in the Rudhyar Archives at Syracuse University Library; a transcription by Ruth Pasquine is available at the Raymond Jonson Archives.

³⁰ Martin Diamond, *Who Were They? My Personal Contact With Thirty-five American Modernists Your Art History Course Never Mentioned* (New Rochelle, NJ: M. Diamond, 1995), 47.

³¹ Rudhyar referred to Bisttram as late as 1982, in *The Magic of Tone and the Art of Music* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1982).

contact with all three long afterward, and made a number of visits to Jonson and Bisttram in New Mexico, as well as Pelton in California. Rudhyar's ideas had a demonstrable effect in the art of all three painters, which I discuss in detail in subsequent chapters.

Of the ten members of the Transcendental Painting Group, I focus my work on Bisttram, Jonson, and Pelton because they were the three most responsible for the founding and workings of the organization, and their work approaches a similar range of themes and issues. While they disagreed on a number of philosophical and aesthetic points, their work addresses aspects of metaphysical religion and expresses ideas about Native American cultures of the Southwest, refracted, if at different angles, through a common set of intellectual prisms. Although several of the younger artists created works that relate to this discourse, they were each at the beginning of careers that would take them in vastly different directions, well beyond the scope of this project.

Furthermore, Bisttram, Jonson, and Pelton began studying metaphysical religion during the early twentieth century, near the height of the Theosophical movement. By the 1930s, a range of derivative traditions, what Olav Hammer described as "Post-Theosophy" had overshadowed the original Theosophical Society, in part because of political struggles that splintered the organization, as well as to accommodate new scientific perspectives that seemed incompatible with the work of Helena Blavatsky, the founder of modern Theosophy. This loose constellation of metaphysical religious organizations was one basis for what was eventually dubbed "New Age" religion.³² Separated by a generation from their older peers in the Transcendental Painting Group,

³² Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 82.

the younger artists inhabited a markedly changed religious milieu, in which the earlier primacy of the Theosophical Society had significantly abated.

To be sure, though Bisttram, Jonson, and Pelton had formed many of their religious ideals during the height of Theosophy, they continued to work and develop throughout the shifting metaphysical landscape in the early twentieth century, and were never exclusively beholden to Theosophical dogma as it was originally constituted. They continued, however, to adhere much closer to those ideas than any of their younger associates. Garman understood that a philosophical divide set the senior artists apart; discussing their continued interest in Theosophy, he wrote that they still had “one foot in the nineteenth century.”³³

As a formal organization of artists, the participants uniformly considered the group a failure. Despite their efforts at generating publicity, the organization was unable to spur any marked increase in sales of the artists’ works, and plans for multiple exhibitions never materialized.³⁴ Jonson was particularly disappointed with the group’s dissolution, but maintained that the artists involved were still eventually able to achieve their goals of creating religiously significant artwork. As he noted late in his career, “We made quite a stir at the time,” and, despite the brevity of the period, “for me there was inspiration in this meeting of like minds, however much our individual ways differed.”³⁵

³³ Garman, *The History of the Transcendental Painting Group and the Definition of Transcendental Painting*, 31.

³⁴ Blankenship, *Vision and Spirit*, 5-7. As Blankenship described, the entire Transcendental Painting Group only exhibited together twice when the group was active, although various combinations of group members were shown together in several other exhibitions.

³⁵ Jonson to Peter Larisey, 14 Nov., 1973, Raymond Jonson Archives.

While the Transcendental Painting Group provides a rubric for understanding the work of a particular set of artists, as an organization, it was ultimately less coherent and lasting than the unofficial association that Bisttram, Jonson, and Pelton shared. Perhaps the most alike of the minds involved, Bisttram, Jonson, and Pelton learned from each others' art and ideas, stayed in contact the rest of their lives, but always maintained their own distinct approaches. Although I devote individual chapters to the work of these three artists, I consider the contributions of their associates both in and out of the official Transcendental Painting Group throughout.

Approaches to Religion in the Transcendental Painting Group

Though the organization itself was short lived, the Transcendental Painting Group did have lasting currency in scholarship on American art as exemplifying abstract art with intended spiritual significance. Beginning with contemporary surveys, writers characterized the group as an expression of the strain of modernism that emphasized inner feeling and, in art historian Raymond Piper's words, "awareness of the intangible."³⁶ Seldom, however, did any of these accounts address the specific religious sources that informed the artists of the Transcendental Painting Group. Scholarship still lacks any thorough and critical evaluation of the artists' engagements with particular religious discourses.

This dissertation excavates the cultural context surrounding a body of artwork that has been interpreted almost exclusively in formal terms. Even while Bisttram,

³⁶ Raymond Piper and Lila K. Piper, *Cosmic Art* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1975), xiii. The first survey text to mention the Transcendental Painting Group was apparently Martha Candler Cheney's *Modern Art in America* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1939), 85-86. Sheldon Cheney included the organization in *The Story of Modern Art* (New York: Viking, 1941), 609.

Jonson, and Pelton were active, their work was most often discussed for its stylistic innovation. Cultural factors surrounding its production were seldom approached by critics, and those who did note the religious aspects of their paintings generally avoided any substantial detail about precisely how the paintings were influenced by religious ideas, or what specific religious meanings they were meant to entail. Though all three artists, to varying degrees, discussed their work in relation to Theosophy and related forms of metaphysical religion, only a handful of scholarly accounts make any serious effort to go beyond merely mentioning their use of “occult symbols” or alluding to a vaguely defined sense of spirituality.

Instead, critics have evaded directly addressing the religious significance of the work of the Transcendental Painting Group by employing the term “spiritual” rather than “religious.” Many previous writers have failed to recognize the degree to which Bistram, Jonson, and Pelton participated in contemporary debates regarding the relationship between art and religion, hesitating to treat the metaphysical traditions to which the artists belonged as actual religions. Accordingly, scholarship on the Transcendental Painting Group has relied on the schematic of spirituality rather than religion, positing the two realms as related, but fundamentally distinct.

Recent work on the study of religion has questioned this dialectic. Penny Marler and Kirk Hadaway argued that despite a generalized recognition of the differences between “being religious” and “being spiritual” in the United States, definitions vary dramatically across geographic, socioeconomic, and ethnic divisions. In addition, common usage of the term “spiritual” to imply a preference for individual religious expression outside of organized churches fails to account for the importance of

spirituality, defined in multitudinous ways, within such churches—Marler and Hadaway’s research showed that most individuals who considered themselves “spiritual” also considered themselves “religious,” and that only a small proportion of the population considered themselves “spiritual but not religious.”³⁷

As C. John Sommerville argued, however, despite vague definitions of what constitutes religion and how or if it differs from spirituality, the terms have become politicized over the past several decades, as “religion” has been associated with conservative Christian groups, and “spirituality” with a wide range of liberal religious organizations.³⁸ Writers have adopted the term “spirituality” as a framework for interpreting religious motivations throughout various realms of cultural production without having to explain or apologize for their religious context. The term has come to represent religious practice disassociated from dogmatics or organization: as Sommerville expressed, “spirituality is more like an aesthetic category. It is an awareness or apprehension, like a feeling for beauty.”³⁹

Concomitant with the emphasis on “spirituality” as opposed to “religion” in the study of modernism in America is a widely held assumption that the influence of religion gradually waned in diametrical response to the scientific advancements beginning with the Enlightenment. Sally Promey described the effect of the “secularization theory of modernity” as reinforcing the “construction of modernism as an art of innovation, individualism, and transgression, characterized by a radical break

³⁷ Penny Long Marler and C. Kirk Hadaway, ““Being Religious” or “Being Spiritual” in America: a Zero-Sum Proposition?” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41, no. 2 (Jun., 2002): 289-300.

³⁸ C. John Sommerville, *Religion in the National Agenda: What We Mean by Religious, Spiritual, Secular* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009), 7.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

with the past, with its traditions and traditional institutions.”⁴⁰ In fact, as Promey has demonstrated, religion remained immensely influential as a shaping force on art in the United States throughout the twentieth century. Nonetheless, the perceived incompatibility of religion and modernism has limited scholarly discussion of the Transcendental Painting Group. In emphasizing their innovative originality, writers have neglected the religious sources that sparked their creativity. Ed Garman, for example, described the spiritual aspect of their work not in relation to the various specific religious discourses with which Bisttram, Jonson, and Pelton were engaged, but as a “complete freedom of mind and feeling.”⁴¹

The particular religious traditions with which Bisttram, Jonson, and Pelton identified have further hampered scholarship on the Transcendental Painting Group. Scholars have employed the terminology of “spirituality” rather than “religion” with relative ease in discussing these artists, because the metaphysical religions that they espoused have been traditionally resistant to standardized definitions of religion, categorized instead as “fringe” or “occult” practices. Theosophy and related metaphysical religious movements emphasized individual experience and conviction over religious hierarchy and dogma. Contemporary Theosophical writers distanced themselves from the “narrowness” and “creedalism” that they associated with contemporary Christian denominations by insisting that Theosophy was not a religion, as such, but a “movement” composed of individuals from diverse religious

⁴⁰ Sally Promey, “The ‘Return’ of Religion in the Scholarship of American Art,” *Art Bulletin* 85, no. 3 (Sept., 2003): 584.

⁴¹ Ed Garman, interview conducted by Derrick Cartwright, 25 Mar. and 30 Mar., 1998. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

backgrounds.⁴² They emphasized that adherents did not give up their religious identity by becoming Theosophists; rather, they asserted, Theosophy had the potential to increase their devotion to whatever religion they espoused. As Lilian Edger wrote, “a Christian who is at the same time an earnest and believing student of theosophy will be a much better Christian than he was before he ever heard of theosophy.”⁴³

In practice, however, Theosophy frequently attracted individuals who had not been strongly attached to a particular religious denomination, and many described their experience of joining as a religious conversion.⁴⁴ E. T. Hargrove, president of the Theosophical Society in America at the turn of the century, wrote, “We have among us Christians of all denominations, Buddhists, Jews, agnostics, and others, besides those who distinctively call themselves Theosophists, though the large majority of our members come under the last named category... many members become ‘Theosophists’ after having been in the society for some time.”⁴⁵ Though Hargrove asserted that Theosophy was not technically a religion by his definition, he conceded that most members in the United States nonetheless considered it their primary religion; he described joining the society as an initial step, but “converting” to Theosophy as a longer process. In the 1890 U. S. census, 695 individuals specified their religion as “Theosophy,” which was not a listed choice, and despite the organization’s claim that it

⁴² Helena Blavatsky, “Recent Progress in Theosophy,” *North American Review* 151, no. 405 (Aug., 1890): 173-174.

⁴³ Lilian Edger, *The Elements of Theosophy* (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1904), 202.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Mark Bevir’s description of Annie Besant’s decision to join the Theosophical Society in “Annie Besant’s Quest for Truth: Christianity, Secularism and New Age Thought,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 50, no. 1 (Jan., 1999): 83-86.

⁴⁵ E. T. Hargrove, “Progress of Theosophy in the United States,” *North American Review* 182, no. 475 (Jun., 1896): 701.

was not actually a religion, making it the 118th out of 143 religious organizations represented by the census.⁴⁶

Contemporary critics of Theosophy also insisted that the society actually *was* a religion, largely agreeing with Hargrove's characterization, but to a much different purpose. Merwin-Marie Snell, for example, argued that Theosophy's claim to oppose creedalism and dogmatism was only superficial:

The Theosophical Society professes to have as its object, not the propagation of a special creed, but the promotion of human brotherhood, the investigation of the occult powers and forces of nature, and the study of Oriental literatures. Nevertheless it has taught from the beginning a distinct system which has crystallized more and more into an accepted orthodoxy.⁴⁷

Snell and other contemporaries recognized the degree to which Theosophy promulgated its own sacred texts, claimed to advance newly revealed knowledge, and codified explanations of metaphysical propositions in a manner that mirrored the structure of organized religions. They interpreted the Theosophical Society's insistence that it was not a religion as simply a smoke-screen to lure Christians, making it appear that joining would not necessarily mean converting away from their present church.⁴⁸

Subsequent scholarly histories of religion in the United States, due both to the difficulty of placing Theosophy within traditional accounts dominated by an emphasis on Christianity, as well as to the Theosophical Society's own position that it was not a

⁴⁶ Paul A. Carter, *The Spiritual Crisis of the Gilded Age* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1971), 202. Carter used this statistic to discount the contemporary influence of Theosophy, interpreting the census data as an accurate total of the number of Theosophists in the United States. In fact, the Theosophical Society counted over 45,000 members at its height in the 1920s. See Bruce Campbell, *Ancient Wisdom Revived: a History of the Theosophical Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 176.

⁴⁷ Merwin-Marie Snell, "Theosophy in its Relation to Hinduism and Buddhism," *The Biblical World* 5, no. 3 (Mar., 1895): 200.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Julius Richter's characterization of the Theosophical Society's proselytizing efforts in India in *A History of Missions in India* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1908), 378-389.

religion in the normal sense, overlooked the tremendous impact that Theosophy and related metaphysical traditions had on American culture around the turn of the twentieth century. Instead, the vast majority of literature on Theosophy can be divided into two main categories: apologetic accounts by Theosophists, and debunking attacks by critics with particular religious or anti-religious agendas.⁴⁹ Only recently have scholars begun to recognize the significance of Theosophy in the religious terrain of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In his account of the development of “spirituality” as a distinct strain of American religiosity, Leigh Schmidt included the Theosophical Society among the many influential organizations that offered alternatives to the “British Protestant inheritance,” an eclectic mix of freethinkers and reformers that pushed “away from the old ‘religions of authority’ into the new ‘religion of the spirit.’”⁵⁰ Schmidt located the origins of the contemporary discourse of “spirituality vs. religion” much further back than the 1960s religious upheaval, tracing an unbroken strain of liberal religious dissent that stretches back to the New England Transcendentalists of the early 1800s. He recognized Theosophy as a key link in this chain; an enormously influential organization that absorbed much from the earlier movements, but then reinterpreted and

⁴⁹ Two examples among the most frequently cited sources on Theosophy are Sylvia Cranston’s hagiographical biography, *HPB: the Extraordinary Life and Influence of Helena Blavatsky, Founder of the Modern Theosophical Movement* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1993), and Peter Washington’s exposé, *Madame Blavatsky’s Baboon* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995). Both are lengthy, well-researched, ostensibly scholarly volumes, but neither is remotely objective.

⁵⁰ Leigh Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper, 2005), 4-8.

re-imagined this source material, creating the basis for subsequent metaphysical and New Age ideologies.⁵¹

As Catherine Albanese argued in *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: a Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion*, metaphysical movements should be interpreted not as individual and unrelated phenomena, but as a correlated group of expressions, sharing a coherent core of ideas.⁵² Albanese traced a number of key themes throughout seemingly disparate religious traditions, demonstrating the social importance of metaphysical religion throughout the history of the American Republic. She situated Theosophy at a crucial moment linking earlier ideas from occultism, spiritualism, and related realms with more modern forms including nature worship and New Age traditions.⁵³ I follow Albanese and Schmidt by treating metaphysical religions as coherent systems of belief, with attendant literatures, practices, and organizational structures, allowing for a much richer account of the religious context of the Transcendental Painting Group.

As I discuss in detail in subsequent chapters, the artists themselves were partially responsible for the widespread assumption that their work had no affiliation with any particular religion. Emil Bisttram was most vocal in claiming Theosophy as a significant influence in his thought and art. Despite their longtime study of Theosophy, connections to metaphysical writers, and clear dependence on Theosophical thought in their art, Jonson and Pelton remained relatively mute about the relation between their art

⁵¹ Ibid., 158-179.

⁵² Catharine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: a Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

⁵³ Ibid., 330-394.

and any religious organization. Apparently, one of their primary motivations was the association of “traditional” religious art with sectarian Christianity; they intended their work to reflect more “universal” spiritual values, fitting with the strongly non-denominational bent of contemporary metaphysical religions.⁵⁴

Their insistence that their art was radically different from certain other modes of religious art, however, has been wrongly interpreted to signify that their work was not explicitly religious. In fact, each of these artists espoused religious beliefs, drawn at least in part from organized religious institutions, which were instrumental in their development of aesthetic theories. Bisttram, Pelton, and Jonson each adhered to religious systems that included specific practices and dogmas, influences that made an indelible imprint in their artwork. Symbols in their paintings were not just vague allusions to a mutable “spirituality,” but intended as references to specific beliefs from identifiable organized systems.

Scholarship on Religion in the Art of the Transcendental Painting Group

As a highly influential liberal religious movement around the turn of the twentieth century, art historians have long attended to the significance of Theosophy in modernist art. Focusing on the work of European painters, Mark Antliff, June Hargrove, Rose Carol Washington Long, and David Stewart, among others, have demonstrated that Theosophy was not only an important source of themes and imagery, but also mediated artists’ approaches to various other cultural realms.⁵⁵ In American art

⁵⁴ See chapter four for a discussion of Raymond Jonson’s views on traditional Christian religious painting.

⁵⁵ See Mark Antliff, “The Fourth Dimension and Futurism: a Politicized Space,” *Art Bulletin* 82, no. 4 (Dec., 2000): 720-733; June Hargrove, “*Woman with a Fan*: Paul Gauguin’s Heavenly Vairaumati—a

history, Sherrye Cohn, Charles Eldredge, Cynthia Fowler, and others have recognized the significance of Theosophy and other metaphysical systems to numerous modernist artists of the United States, in some cases establishing connections among artists on both sides of the Atlantic, and in others noting the distinct influence of American Theosophical writers.⁵⁶ Although scholars have laid a solid groundwork for studies of metaphysical religion in American modernism, religious themes in the work of many artists have not yet been accorded sufficient scholarly attention.

Very few accounts of Bisttram, Jonson, or Pelton posit metaphysical religion as an important consideration in their work. Most gloss over the significance of religious sources by repeating platitudes about generalized spiritual transcendence and ignoring the artists' actual religious motivations. In the exhibition catalog, *Vision and Spirit*, Tiska Blankenship acknowledged the influence of "Theosophy, Zen Buddhism, Dynamic Symmetry, and other philosophical and occult concepts" on the Transcendental Painting Group, but asserted that the term "spiritual" as used by the artists:

...is meant to convey something other than religious meaning—rather something that is reached from a process of refining integrity, skill, knowledge, and experience into an artistic statement conveying openness and acceptance—and something that is ultimately helpful to inspiring the human condition.⁵⁷

Parable of Immortality," *Art Bulletin* 88, no. 3 (Sept., 2006): 552-566; Rose Carol Washington Long, "Occultism, Anarchism, and Abstraction: Kandinsky's Art of the Future," *Art Journal* 46, no. 1 (Spring, 1987): 38-45; Stewart David, "Theosophy and Abstraction in the Victorian Era: the Paintings of G. F. Watts," *Apollo* 139, no. 381 (Nov., 1993): 298-302.

⁵⁶ See Sherrye Cohn, "Arthur Dove and Theosophy: Visions of a Transcendental Reality," *Arts Magazine* 58, no. 1 (Sept., 1983): 86-91; Charles Eldredge, "Nature Symbolized: American Painting from Ryder to Hartley," in *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985*, ed. Maurice Tuchman, 113-130 (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986); Cynthia Fowler, "The Intersecting of Theosophy and Modernism: Katherine Dreier and the Modern American Woman," *Oculus* 3, no. 1 (2000): 2-15.

⁵⁷ Blankenship, 6.

Blankenship's definition of "spiritual" accords with Sommerville's discussion of spirituality as an "aesthetic category;" she framed it as a positive and laudable insistence on artistic excellence with humanitarian aims, but devoid of any "religious meaning." She failed to note, however, that Bisttram, Jonson, and Pelton each conceived of all of these terms—integrity, skill, knowledge, experience, openness, acceptance—as both spiritual *and* religious. Though they intended their art to reflect "universal" rather than sectarian religious tenets, their work nonetheless engaged with themes and symbols drawn from very specific religious sources.

This fact is apparent in the name that the group chose to adopt; Rudhyar wrote that the word "transcendental" meant "a departure from some familiar and habitual realm, and a reaching into a world, condition of existence, or state of consciousness which lies beyond... a realm of thought or existence beyond the physical or sensorial plane."⁵⁸ He noted that Emerson and the nineteenth century Transcendentalists were engaged in a similar pursuit, but he claimed them as part of the larger syncretic project of Theosophy by asserting that their search for authentic spirituality was presaged by ancient philosophers, and continued by modern physicists.⁵⁹ Rudhyar conceived of the Transcendental Painting Group as following in the same path as the Transcendentalists, but expanding their purview to include the wider realm of religious and scientific knowledge that Theosophy purportedly encompassed.

Scholars have given limited attention to the significance of metaphysical religion in the work of the Transcendental Painting Group, beginning with Maurice

⁵⁸ Rudhyar, *A New Growth Proves the Fertility of the Southwest*, 1.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

Tuchman's groundbreaking exhibition, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Charles Eldredge's essay, "Nature Symbolized: American Painting from Ryder to Hartley," uncovered a wealth of information relating American art to esoteric religious traditions.⁶⁰ Eldredge's work elicited significant stimulus for further research, but provided relatively little detail about the work of the Transcendental Painting Group.

Recent work on Agnes Pelton has made significant progress in exploring the relationship of her religious belief to her art. Michael Zakian's 1995 exhibition catalog, *Agnes Pelton, Poet of Nature*, addresses the Theosophical underpinnings of her paintings about cosmogenesis.⁶¹ Nancy Strow Sheley's dissertation, "Bringing Light to Life: the Art of Agnes Pelton," provides a great deal of biographical information about the artists' religious background, with limited but useful consideration of its significance in her work.⁶²

Surprisingly, given Bisttram's frequent references to Theosophy throughout his art and writing, scholarship on the religious aspect of his work is even less thorough. The only work to seriously investigate this subject is Ruth Pasquine's dissertation, "The Politics of Redemption: Dynamic Symmetry, Theosophy, and Swedenborgianism in the Art of Emil Bisttram." Pasquine focused on the stylistic influence of Hambidge's Dynamic Symmetry compositional system, and suggested potential sources for a wide

⁶⁰ Eldredge, "Nature Symbolized."

⁶¹ Zakian, *Agnes Pelton, Poet of Nature*.

⁶² Nancy Strow Sheley, "Bringing Light to Life: The Art of Agnes Pelton" (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 2000).

range of Bisttram's paintings, but gives only limited attention to the specific religious texts that informed his work.⁶³

While scholars have devoted some attention to the religious context of Pelton's and Bisttram's work, they have largely accepted the view that Raymond Jonson's art was motivated only by a detached "spirituality" based on aesthetic rather than religious transcendence. This is due in part to Jonson's own disavowal of what he termed "occult symbols" and his relative reticence in discussing his religious belief, but it owes more to the interpretation of his biographer, Ed Garman. In his monograph, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*, 1976, Garman situated Jonson's abstractions within a Greenbergian framework, celebrating their emphasis on form, material, and surface, while discounting the significance of subject matter.⁶⁴ Garman's work was prescient of other late twentieth century writers who addressed the Transcendental Painting Group by interpreting their work according to the preeminent critical perspectives of the time, devoting their attention to formal concerns rather than cultural context.⁶⁵

I reframe the significance of the work of Bisttram, Jonson, and Pelton by avoiding the generalized discourse of spirituality, focusing instead on the specifics of religion. Archival materials demonstrate the primacy of religion in each of these artists'

⁶³ Ruth Pasquine, "The Politics of Redemption: Dynamic Symmetry, Theosophy, and Swedenborgianism in the Art of Emil Bisttram" (PhD diss., The City University of New York, 2000).

⁶⁴ See Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*.

⁶⁵ Recent work has dramatically revised scholarly understanding of the abstract expressionist painters that Greenberg championed, recognizing the significance of cultural factors in their art, despite the critic's ardent disavowal. Rushing treats their references to American Indian art in *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde: a History of Cultural Primitivism* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1995); Serge Guilbaut and David Craven offer competing interpretations of the political significance of abstract expressionism in their respective works, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983) and *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique: Dissent During the McCarthy Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

oeuvres. Though their religious beliefs varied considerably, as did their individual conceptions of the ideal expression of those beliefs in their art, their work reflects a studied encounter with Theosophy and related forms of metaphysical religion. Furthermore, recognizing the significance of religion in the art of the Transcendental Painting Group is essential in understanding the cultural context surrounding its production.

In addition, my work provides a new perspective on the contributions of these artists to contemporary debates about the role of art in religion, and the ideal aesthetics of religious art. As Sally Promey described, mid-twentieth century Protestant critics advanced “aesthetic discernment” as an important religious practice, arguing that “right forms would lead to right behavior and right belief, a new liberal Protestant ‘orthodoxy’ achieved through aesthetics.”⁶⁶ More than just a set of superficial formal considerations, particular aesthetic modes were considered more or less expressive of “authentic” religious meaning. And, as Promey demonstrated, the terms used to describe authentic religious art were frequently dependent on contemporary normative constructions of gender and sexuality.⁶⁷

Though Bistram, Jonson, and Pelton did not directly participate in these debates, they were nonetheless a part of the broader discourse defining the religious potential of modernist art. Their understanding of the relationship between art and spirituality, though based in metaphysical religious traditions, still incorporated ideas

⁶⁶ Sally Promey, “Taste Cultures: the Visual Practice of Liberal Protestantism, 1940-1965,” in *Practicing Protestants: histories of Christian Life in America, 1630-1965*, edited by Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, Leigh E. Schmidt, and Mark Valeri, 250-293 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 254.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 261-262.

from Protestant critical perspectives. And, as I demonstrate, their own conceptions of “authenticity” in religious art were also heavily dependent on contemporary cultural politics.

I hope to spur serious consideration of the role of metaphysical religions in American art by demonstrating that religious writers and artists both participated in the discourse of defining aesthetic ideals and evaluating the religious significance of works of art. While art historians have long acknowledged the importance of Theosophy in modernist art, few have made use of the wealth of texts on art and aesthetics by Theosophical writers. Much as Christian writers and critics had, metaphysical religionists participated in debates about the place of art in worship and the ideal aesthetics of religiously meaningful art. Instead of focusing primarily on artists’ contribution to this discourse, as earlier scholars have, I also interpret a range of significant texts from Theosophical journals and related sources, giving a richer understanding of the religious motivations of Bistram, Jonson, and Pelton.

Theorizing Primitivism

Scholars have overlooked another closely related theme in the work of the Transcendental Painting Group: their interest in Native American cultures, histories, religions, and arts. As I demonstrate, Bistram, Jonson, and Pelton each recorded their encounters with American Indian cultures through their work. Much of their affinity for the Southwest came through their understanding that the cultural diversity of the region was unique in the United States. Resonating with many contemporary theories

explaining the nature of “primitive” culture and its potential to impact modern art, and disagreeing with others, the Transcendental Painting Group artists formed their own individual expressions of modernist primitivism.

In addressing this subject, I reference theoretical constructs of primitivism from numerous scholars, but argue for a unique strain of primitivism that characterizes the work of the Transcendental Painting Group, based largely on their ideas about Native American cultures derived from metaphysical religious sources. Primitivism, a highly contested term, carries contingent meaning that has varied dramatically in theoretical interpretations over time. A significant body of criticism on the subject arose in response to *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1984, and the accompanying catalog, edited by William Rubin.

Rubin argued that early modernists were influenced by the work of “tribal” artists; by pairing works of modernist art with cultural products from a range of non-Western societies, he sought to demonstrate that the Western artists had arrived at similar solutions to “universal” aesthetic problems because of “affinities” in their underlying attitudes, or even subconscious mental processes. As Rubin wrote, “what Picasso recognized in [African] sculptures was ultimately a part of himself, of his own psyche, and therefore a witness to the humanity he shared with their carvers.”⁶⁸ In Rubin’s view, modern artists did not merely appropriate stylistic elements from particular non-Western objects; their search for a more fulfilling, emotionally open, and less constrained way of life and art led them to the same aesthetic as people who

⁶⁸ William Rubin and others, *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, ed. William Rubin (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 73.

presumably already lived such a life, outside the bounds of Western culture and morality.

Rubin's catalog elicited a sometimes heated debate that focused unprecedented attention on the concept of primitivism.⁶⁹ James Clifford questioned the concept of "affinities" in "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern," arguing that the careful selection of non-Western works that seemed to show formal correspondence with the modern European painting and sculpture in the exhibit excluded a vast range of cultural products from around the world that could argue against any significant affinity. "An equally striking collection could be made demonstrating sharp dissimilarities of tribal and modern objects," he wrote.⁷⁰

Perhaps more significantly, he argued that the notion of "affinity," as presented by the Museum of Modern Art, falsely characterized modern Western art as culturally inclusive, redemptive of world art traditions that were previously ignored or despised, and expressive of universal kinship through shared "creative potential." In fact, Clifford asserted, "the catalogue succeeds in demonstrating, not any essential affinity between tribal and modern or even a coherent modernist attitude toward the primitive, but rather the restless desire and power of the modern West to collect the world."⁷¹ A more compelling account of similarities between "tribal" art and Western modernism,

⁶⁹ See Hal Foster, "The 'Primitive' Unconscious of Modern Art," *October* 34 (Autumn, 1985): 45-70; Thomas McEvelley, "Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief," *Artforum* 23, no. 2 (Oct., 1984): 60; David Penney, Review of *Primitivism in 20th Century Art* by William Rubin, *African Arts* 18, no. 4 (Aug., 1985):27, 90-91; Sally Price, Review of *Primitivism in 20th Century Art* by William Rubin, *American Ethnologist* 13, no. 3 (Aug., 1986): 578-580.

⁷⁰ James Clifford, "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern," *Art in America* 73, no. 4 (1985): 166.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 166-167.

Clifford argued, might investigate the cultural conditions that allowed for a wide range of objects to be rather suddenly dubbed “art.”

And, Clifford added, “That this construction of a generous category of art pitched at a global scale occurs just as the planet’s tribal peoples come massively under European political, economic, and evangelical dominion cannot be irrelevant.”⁷² The curators’ insistence that the politics of imperialist colonialism were outside the purview of their exhibition failed, in the estimation of many critics, to justify any serious discussion of the various types of relationships that connected and continue to connect Western and non-Western peoples aside from superficial aesthetic concerns. Since the publication of *Primitivism in 20th Century Art*, much scholarship on primitivism in art has directly addressed the politics of colonial and post-colonial power relations; scholars can no longer ignore the significance of the often violent cultural encounters that accompanied the collecting of non-Western cultural objects and made possible the appropriation of allegedly “primitive” styles.

Perhaps the most significant change in the scholarly approach to primitivism is the diminishing currency of the term itself other than as a historical concept, a marker of diverse meanings at different points in history. Current scholarship approaches primitivism as a concept that informed the production of European and American art from the late nineteenth century through the present, not as a discernible or essential characteristic of art with any objective existence. While scholars discuss the importance of primitivism as a conceptual framework in various historical contexts, they no longer give it credence as a discursive mode.

⁷² Ibid., 169.

Lynda Jessup offered another useful critique of early scholarship on primitivism by questioning the propriety of searching for one discreet, overarching framework that connected all artists whose work might be considered “primitivist.” Instead, she recognized a panoply of diverse primitivisms, “a great variety of personal and collective quests for innocence, for authenticity, and for simpler, safer premodern spaces within the broader borders of the modern world.”⁷³ I follow Jessup’s model by interpreting the Transcendental Painting Group’s primitivism as a unique expression molded by the combination of cultural factors that combined in a singular fashion within their work. While I draw on the work of other scholars to interpret their art within a broader context, I recognize their art as unique expressions of particular cultural situations.

Among the facets of primitivist discourse that have been obscured by an overly narrow scholarly focus is the diversity of non-Western cultures that influenced artists in the West. Many early theorists of primitivism focused on arts of Africa and Oceania, produced by what were considered the most “authentically primitive” cultures by virtue of their supposedly minimal contact with the modern Western world. Despite the prominence of art reflecting an interest in Native American cultures, indigenous peoples of the United States were commonly omitted from these accounts, as histories of their extended contact with European American societies were well-known.⁷⁴ Much Native American art, in fact, would not seem to fit the definition of primitivism that Rubin espoused, as he considered the production of loosely-organized, “tribal” cultures the

⁷³ Lynda Jessup, “Antimodernism and Artistic Experience: an Introduction,” in *Antimodernism and Artistic Experience: Policing the Boundaries of Modernity*, ed. Lynda Jessup (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001): 3-9.

⁷⁴ See Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 32-33.

most important influences in modernist art, as they were taken to represent a freedom from accretions of state and religion that characterized the highly stratified and intensely structured culture of the modern West.⁷⁵

In fact, artists' interests in non-Western cultures ranged much more broadly; Helen Carr has criticized the tendency of late twentieth century scholars, including Rubin, to fashion too narrow a definition of primitivism, ignoring the influence of highly organized societies like the Egyptians or Aztecs. "To separate off these groups," she wrote, "is to impose an anachronistic split in the responses of these writers and artists: in their search for other sources of vitality and inspiration these distinctions were not so important as the shared exoticism and apparent freshness of these other traditions."⁷⁶

Carr's broadened definition of primitivism is especially helpful in studying the Transcendental Painting Group, as these artists were concerned not as much with finding freedom from the constraints of modern Western society, but in investigating cultures that they considered primitive in order to uncover knowledge that could improve Western civilization. Rather than appropriating from allegedly morally-unrestrained societies, they sought out cultures with complex forms of religious and social organization that might offer insight to their own Western culture. In their work, Bisttram, Jonson, and Pelton each addressed cultural groups that were considered, in the early twentieth century, among the least "primitive" of tribal societies, as the Pueblo Indians had long been recognized as one the most highly developed indigenous

⁷⁵ Rubin, 2-5.

⁷⁶ Helen Carr, *Inventing the American Primitive: Politics, Gender and the Representation of Native American Literary Traditions, 1789-1936* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), 210.

American cultures, possessing relatively advanced agricultural and construction techniques.⁷⁷ Clearly, the limited model of primitivism as an interest in the “least advanced” cultures is inapplicable to the artists of the Transcendental Painting Group.

Politics of Representation in the Art of the Transcendental Painting Group

Tisa Wenger’s *We Have a Religion* is the most extensive study detailing shifting attitudes toward Pueblo ceremonialism by various religious organizations, and the ways in which the Pueblo themselves were able to frame their cultural practices within competing definitions of religion to their own advantage.⁷⁸ Wenger’s perspective on the cultural implications of Native American religions in the early twentieth century has usefully informed my own study. Although the influence of metaphysical religions on contemporary cultural politics was not as marked as that of the Christian denominations that Wenger addresses, various metaphysical groups held an overlapping set of ideas about American Indian cultures and religions that influenced a significant range of cultural theorists in the Southwest.

Very little scholarship details metaphysical religious views on Native Americans, or their implications in American art and culture. There is, however, a significant body of work attempting to discredit occult and New Age appropriation of American Indian religion. Among the best known is the work of Lisa Aldred and Vine Deloria Jr. While both raise important questions about the political implications of religious appropriation, they criticize metaphysical religions in a manner that fails to

⁷⁷ See, for example, Tisa Wenger, *We Have a Religion: The 1920s Pueblo Indian Dance Controversy and American Religious Freedom* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 97.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

address the sincerity of believers' practices. Aldred understood New Age groups as merely another guise of the very sort of commercialism that adherents attempt to avoid by emulating native peoples, and Deloria argued that people with Christian backgrounds can never fully comprehend American Indian ceremonialism. Both portray practitioners of metaphysical religions as misguided, foolish, and uninformed.⁷⁹ I acknowledge the general deficiency of metaphysical religious writers' interpretations of Native American cultures, but recognize that they nonetheless give important insight into contemporary cultural perspectives.

While their depictions of American Indians were often laudatory, Bisttram, Jonson, and Pelton each held outdated and inaccurate ideas that reflect common stereotypes of the era. The fact that artists of the Transcendental Painting Group attended Pueblo ceremonies, knew and sometimes even taught Native Americans, and collected actual Indian cultural products should not be taken as evidence that their work accurately reflects their subjects' beliefs, customs, or cultures. My research demonstrates the degree to which Bisttram, Jonson, and Pelton espoused fallacious and sometimes overtly racist viewpoints drawn from sources in metaphysical religion, as well as from contemporarily widespread Anglo-American interpretations of Native Americans. I rely on Robert Berkhofer's *The White Man's Indian* for a model interpretive framework, as well as a wealth of information about early twentieth century cultural misunderstanding. His concept of the "imaginary Indian," a timeless being untroubled by the exigencies of modern life, provides significant insight into the

⁷⁹ Lisa Aldred, "Plastic Shamans and Astroturf Sun Dances: New Age Commercialization of Native American Spirituality," *American Indian Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (Summer, 2000): 329-352; Vine Deloria Jr., *God is Red: a Native View of Religion* (Golden, CO: North American Press, 1992).

Transcendental Painting Group's generalized and stereotyped depictions of Southwest Indians.⁸⁰

In *The Reinvention of Primitive Society*, Adam Kuper argued that anthropology, ethnography, and other fields of scholarship are still informed by notions of a primitive other that serves as the inverse of Western societies. Even in writing about the history of colonialism, scholars reify notions of primitiveness by considering indigenous peoples as outside of the currents of time and exchange that characterize the world at any moment. This is a particular risk in Postcolonial literature, Kuper argued, as scholars have fashioned polemics against aspects of Western society by reverting to dichotomies between “traditional” or “indigenous” and modern societies: “primitive society is the mirror image of modern society, or rather, primitive society inverts some strategically significant features that are attributed to modern society. Both terms of the opposition are equally imaginary, but they sustain each other.”⁸¹

As Kuper asserted, any discourse that posits a particular cultural group as “ancient,” “traditional,” “tied to the Earth,” or otherwise on a different evolutionary stage than modern civilization reinforces the language of primitivism, even in writing that purports to discredit earlier primitivist ideas or expose the abuses of colonialism. The artists of the Transcendental Painting Group, their associates, and the religious writers they read frequently employed such language, believing that the Indians of the Southwest were on a vastly different chronological plane than the modern West. I

⁸⁰ Robert F. Berkhofer Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Knopf, 1973).

⁸¹ Adam Kuper, *The Reinvention of Primitive Society: Transformations of a Myth* (Oxford: Routledge, 2005), 223.

discuss the implications of this conception in their work, while avoiding this kind of language in my own writing and explicitly distancing my subjects' words from my own.

Thomas Parkhill elaborated on specific ways in which scholars, including notable Native American writers, have perpetuated primitivist assumptions about American Indians even as they attempted to debunk earlier primitivist myths. In *Weaving Ourselves into the Land*, he warned against descriptions of Native American religions that may seem celebratory, but simplify beliefs and practices while relating them to familiar tropes including respect for nature, harmonious living, and stoic adherence to tradition. As he wrote, "it is easy to confuse the 'image of the good Indian' with a 'good image of the Indian.'"⁸²

Although I demonstrate the ways in which the Transcendental Painting Group's artists misrepresented and misunderstood aspects of Southwest Indian cultures, my intent is to achieve a balanced and nuanced understanding of their religious motives in appropriating from those cultures. I frame my discussion of cultural exchange with a perspective influenced by Postcolonial theory, but my aim is not simply to expose the artists' insensitive and racist views. Instead, I attempt to create as rich and detailed an account as possible, demonstrating that individual's intentions were rarely either wholly mendacious or unimpeachably beneficent. As Wenger suggested, although modernists in New Mexico made numerous mistakes based on problematic assumptions about other cultures, they were nonetheless responsible for aiding the Indians' own efforts toward self-determination.⁸³ Rather than merely proving the well-documented potential of

⁸² Thomas C. Parkhill, *Weaving Ourselves into the Land: Charles Godfrey Leland, "Indians," and the Study of Native American Religions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 86.

⁸³ Wenger, *We Have a Religion*, 62.

occult and New Age literature to lend itself to racist interpretations, I expand the purview of scholarship on early to mid-twentieth century metaphysical religions and their approach to questions of racial “difference,” the “evolution” of cultures, and the potential they saw in learning from non-Western cultures.

I attempt to avoid primitivising in my work by distancing my own ideas from those of the artists that I study, while limiting my descriptions of American Indian cultures and religions to discussions of observed practice rather than characterizations of general belief. I enumerate distinctions between ethnographic descriptions of Pueblo ceremonials and the ways in which they were perceived by adherents of metaphysical religions and painted by the Transcendental Painting Group. I do not, however, explain the significance of the rituals or give highly detailed accounts of their expression, as my intent is to illuminate the artists’ understanding of “primitive” religion, not to interpret Pueblo belief, a subject I feel unqualified to adequately represent.

Terminology

One common characteristic of early twentieth century writing on Native Americans is the unquestioned assumption that American Indian ceremonialism could be understood according to the terminology of Western religions. The very use of the term “religion” to describe specific cultural practices of any individual Native American group is problematic. Western notions of a compartmentalized and discreet entity called “religion,” separate from other aspects of culture, fail when applied to cultures without such rigorous distinctions. As Wenger asserted, the Pueblo peoples conceived of ceremonial and ritual observances as inextricably linked to all other aspects of their

culture, from their language to their methods of agriculture.⁸⁴ I refer to “Native American religions” only when describing the limited and constructed category of cultural practices that the artists of the Transcendental Painting Group considered as religious.

Many of the names given to various cultural groups in the Southwest have been the subject of significant contention over the past several decades. “Indian,” a ubiquitous and universal descriptor of all of the indigenous peoples of the Americas during the period of my study, is among the most debated. While some activists have advocated the complete discontinuance of the term, others consider it a symbol of pride.⁸⁵ “Native American” is no less a problematic term, however; as Fergus Bordewich has written, it “implies that other people born in the United States are somehow less ‘native’ than, say, a Yaqui immigrant from Mexico or than someone who may be only one-thirty-second Cherokee by the measure of ‘blood quantum’ but who nonetheless meets the criteria for membership in that tribe.”⁸⁶ I follow Bordewich in accepting that each of these terms is imprecise and fraught with varying cultural significance, but absent any compelling substitute, they are the only suitable descriptors. I use the terms “Native American” and “Indian” to refer to the generalized and non-specific amalgam of indigenous North American cultures that the Transcendental Painting Group artists and their contemporaries in the early to mid-twentieth century

⁸⁴ Ibid., 12-13.

⁸⁵ See Joel Pfister, *Individuality Incorporated: Indians and the Multicultural Modern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 21.

⁸⁶ Fergus Bordewich, *Killing the White Man’s Indian: Reinventing Native Americans at the End of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 19-20.

recognized as a monolithic entity. When discussing particular cultural groups, I use their accepted tribal names.

The term “Pueblo,” however, presents an additional problem, in that it is an appellation imposed by the colonizing Spaniards in the late sixteenth century describing any indigenous culture that lived in permanent structures. As Tisa Wenger noted, “Not until the early nineteenth century, when the first Anglos arriving in the region misunderstood the Spanish word, did the term ‘Pueblo’ gain ethnic connotations as a unifying designator for this specific group of tribes.”⁸⁷ The name fails to distinguish between the three distinct linguistic groups and nineteen existing Pueblos that regard themselves as culturally unique.⁸⁸ The Pueblos have strengthened themselves in the face of centuries of oppression by unifying both political and cultural resources, however, and have come to recognize a shared cultural identity on many levels. By the nineteenth century, Wenger continued, “the Indians were ready to embrace this usage... Despite their many differences, the history and traditions shared by the Pueblos of New Mexico had in many respects forged them into a single people.”⁸⁹ This sense of unity has continued to the present, as expressed in the various constituent peoples’ use of the term “Pueblo” to describe themselves collectively; it is also reflected in their political alliance in the All Indian Pueblo Council.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Wenger, *We Have a Religion*, 24.

⁸⁸ The diversity is even greater if one includes the Hopi pueblos of Arizona. In New Mexico, Acoma, Cochiti, Laguna, San Felipe, Santa Ana, Santo Domingo, and Zia Pueblos speak Keresan, while Taos, Picuris, Sandia, and Isleta speak Tanoan, divided into Tiwa, Tewa, and Towa dialects. The Zunis speak their own language, Zuni. See Sharon O’Brien, *American Indian Tribal Governments* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 162.

⁸⁹ Wenger, *We Have a Religion*, 24-25.

⁹⁰ O’Brien, 162-163.

My use of religious terminology also requires qualification. Theosophists might take issue with the terms “dogma” or “doctrine” used to describe tenets of belief as expounded by Blavatsky or subsequent Theosophical writers, as the Theosophical Society was officially opposed to any definitive statement of creed to which members might be expected to adhere.⁹¹ Tension always existed, however, between the Theosophical Society’s anti-creedal stance and Blavatsky’s and others’ promulgation of specific points of belief, as expressed in the very title of *The Secret Doctrine*, arguably the single most important Theosophical text.⁹² Thus, I refer to concepts widely shared and accepted by adherents as Theosophical “dogma” or “doctrine” without implying that members were necessarily expected or required to agree on these points, and avoid any potential reading of these terms in a pejorative sense.

The Transcendental Painting Group and Primitivism

Scholars have overlooked the Transcendental Painting Group’s interest in Native American cultures for various reasons. In the case of Emil Bisttram, critics continue to regard his paintings of Pueblo dances as less significant than his abstractions. In addition to a lingering sense of a high-modernist bias against representational imagery, they have associated his works on Native American themes with inexpensive paintings for the tourist trade that proliferated in Taos during the early to mid-twentieth century.⁹³ Pasquine’s work is the only scholarship that discusses Bisttram’s paintings on Native American themes in detail or relates them to his

⁹¹ See Campbell, *Ancient Wisdom Revived*, 71-74.

⁹² Helena Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, 2 vols. (London: Theosophical Publishing Company, 1888).

⁹³ Diamond, 44.

religious interests, but it is a limited account that does not address the implications of his religiously determined ideas about allegedly primitive cultures.⁹⁴ I advance this line of inquiry by interpreting Bisttram's paintings from a semiological perspective, uncovering the ways in which his depictions of Indians signify the artist's own cultural values on multiple levels. As I demonstrate, Bisttram's paintings of the Pueblo are actually meaning-laden compositions that fit remarkably within his overall project of religious painting. They are essential in understanding his conception of the potential for abstract art to convey religious meaning.

Jonson's paintings that reference Native Americans have received even less attention. Jonson, however, counted the native history of the Southwest as one of the most important influences in his conception of the region and its potential for artists, and framed his appreciation of the Pueblo people in explicitly religious terms.⁹⁵ He painted numerous works that demonstrate his interest in both ancient and contemporary Pueblo design, and appropriated from native sources in his attempt to create an ideal aesthetic for religious art. Again, high-modernist evaluations of Jonson's art have emphasized formal aspects of these paintings within the artist's aesthetic project, and ignored their cultural implications. Previous scholars have noted his interest in American Indian cultures, but the most detailed discussion to date is a brief section in Jackson Rushing's *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde*.⁹⁶ My work is

⁹⁴ Pasquine, "The Politics of Redemption," 340-400.

⁹⁵ See Jonson, Lecture to the Chili Club, Santa Fe, Aug. 29, 1949, Raymond Jonson Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [RJ 9:6329].

⁹⁶ Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde*, 79-85.

the first to situate these works within the broader contexts of modernism, primitivism, and metaphysical religion.

Among these three artists, Agnes Pelton's interest in Native American cultures is the least documented, in part because she expressed it much less conspicuously in her work. Pelton often traveled to the nearby Cahuilla Reservation to paint her landscapes, and she was familiar with some of the members of the tribe. Rather than basing entire compositions on Southwest Indian design themes, like Jonson, or portraying their ceremonials in her work, like Bisttram, Pelton referenced Native Americans in subtle inclusions in her abstract works, associating the Indians of the Southwest with the ancient wisdom that she believed "primitive" cultures around the world possessed.

Another factor that has limited scholarly interest the Transcendental Painting Group's interpretation of Native American cultures is the artists' general insistence that they were not primitivists in the contemporary understanding of the term. As I discuss, Bisttram, Jonson, and Pelton each recognized societies that they deemed "ancient" as safeguarding important religious knowledge; their intent, however, was not to emulate these cultures or refashion Western society in their image, but to advance civilization forward by combining the best aspects of ancient and modern knowledge.

A central theme in the study of Theosophy is the concept of synthesis. As Siv Ellen Kraft has written, Theosophy and derivative traditions were highly combinative, expressing the belief that all of the world's religions contained important truths vital to the spiritual progress of humanity. As she expressed, the "search for unity in diversity is, perhaps, Theosophy's most important contribution to the late modern fields of

‘alternative’ religiosity.”⁹⁷ As historian Mark Bevir has demonstrated, Theosophists attempted to synthesize the world’s traditions with the most advanced contemporary scientific knowledge.⁹⁸ A significant factor in Theosophy’s popularity in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was its qualified acceptance of such controversial scientific theories as evolution and a multi-million year old Earth, which were still held as unacceptable by numerous Christian denominations.⁹⁹

Scholars have described this combinative project as a form of “syncretism,” a process of hybridization that once carried negative connotations as a marker of impurity or diminished authenticity. As Rosalind Shaw and Charles Stewart have written, however, religious syncretism is better understood as a discourse illustrating the “workings of power and agency” in the “politics of religious synthesis.”¹⁰⁰ In my discussion of the syncretic nature of metaphysical religions, I explore the often imbalanced relations of power that Theosophists attempted to assert over the cultures that they approached as sources from which to synthesize. As I demonstrate, the Transcendental Painting Group’s appropriation from Native American cultures was far from a neutral, objective admiration of American Indian aesthetics.

As I discuss at length in chapter two, Blavatsky and her followers borrowed from contemporary anthropologists a conception of “cultural evolution” that they

⁹⁷ Siv Ellen Kraft, “‘To Mix or Not to Mix:’ Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism in the History of Theosophy.” *Numen* 49, no. 2 (2002): 143.

⁹⁸ See Bevir, “Annie Besant’s Quest for Truth,” 65.

⁹⁹ See, for example, *The Theosophical Movement, 1875-1925: a History and a Survey* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1925), 4-6.

¹⁰⁰ Rosalind Shaw and Charles Stewart, “Problematizing Syncretism,” in *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: the Politics of Religious Synthesis*, ed. Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw, 1-26 (London: Routledge, 1994), 7.

adapted into their religious framework. In Blavatsky's cosmology, individuals progress through a set series of iterations over the course of multiple reincarnations. The vast majority of humanity would be at the same stage at any one point in time. She described these stages as "root races;" nearly everyone living in the same era, regardless of less important distinctions like ethnicity, religion, or nationality, belonged to the same root race in her view. This was the basis for the Theosophical Society's official opposition to racism, expressed in Blavatsky's summary of the goal of Theosophy "to form the nucleus of a Universal Brotherhood of Humanity without distinction of race, colour, or creed."¹⁰¹

Along with other progressive religious groups around the turn of the twentieth century, Theosophists focused attention and resources on the plight of Buddhism in Southeast Asia and Hinduism in India, actively opposing the efforts of Christian missionaries in the region.¹⁰² Bevir asserted that while earlier Romantic and Orientalist writers had lauded the people of India as focused on spiritual rather than material pursuits, Theosophy was the first western organization to actually advocate the study of the "dogmatics of eastern religions."¹⁰³ As Stephen Prothero demonstrated, however, there were limits to the Theosophist's acceptance of other religions, and moments at which their anti-racist efforts broke down. Many of these points of contention were related to practices that Western Theosophists regarded as morally objectionable and, therefore, obvious later accretions; Henry Olcott, cofounder of the Theosophical Society

¹⁰¹ Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy* (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1893), 28.

¹⁰² See Stephen R. Prothero, "Henry Steel Olcott and Protestant Buddhism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63, no. 2 (1995): 281-302, esp. 285.

¹⁰³ Mark Bevir, "The West Turns Eastward: Madame Blavatsky and the Transformation of the Occult Tradition," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62, no. 3 (Autumn, 1994): 748.

and ardent opponent of British Missionary organizations, argued that contemporary Buddhism and Hinduism had been degraded by the introduction of foreign traditions.¹⁰⁴ Blavatsky explained any apparent contradictions in her understanding of Asiatic religions by appealing to an “esoteric” interpretation of Buddhist and Hindu texts that only the enlightened “Masters” in Tibet fully understood.¹⁰⁵ As Kraft wrote, syncretism often meant to Theosophists that “specific religions were ‘rescued’ from the ignorance of their adherents, stripped of ‘degenerated’ ideas, thereby to be incorporated into the myth of an ancient wisdom.”¹⁰⁶

Despite their official anti-racist policy and their commitment to excavating the truth kept by ancient religions around the world, Theosophists were hesitant to embrace indigenous practices as they found them, without qualification. To be sure, they criticized various aspects of Western society, especially the vaguely defined philosophy of “materialism” that they pitted as their main adversary, holding up the cultural beliefs of non-Western peoples as exemplary alternatives. They did not, however, treat those cultures’ religions as wholly sufficient, but attempted to reform Western society through an inoculation of “ancient wisdom” that they gleaned from other cultures. Theosophical writers in the United States held primitivist assumptions about Native American cultures, but, just as their contemporaries did not advocate a wholesale acceptance of Buddhism or Hinduism, they did not favor wholeheartedly adopting what they conceived of as American Indian religion.

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Stephen Prothero, *The White Buddhist: the Asian Odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 144.

¹⁰⁵ See Bevir, “The West Turns Eastward.”

¹⁰⁶ Kraft, 154.

Similarly, modernist artists who espoused primitivist ideals seldom actually attempted to refashion their lives after the “primitive” people that they admired. As Simon Gikandi wrote, “Savagery and the artistic sensibility would intimately be connected in the aesthetic of modernism; however it did not follow that the moderns were willing to give up civilization to become one with the savage.” Instead, he argued, “the primitive was a conduit to understanding ‘civilized’ man, art, and poetry, not an endpoint in itself; there was no incentive to understand the Other unless it would lead to an understanding of Western civilization either in its ‘childhood’ or moments of crisis.”¹⁰⁷ The few who did undertake a serious effort to live like “primitive” people often found that even the remotest societies were not outside of time, but active participants in the modern world of cultural and economic exchange.¹⁰⁸

Members of the Transcendental Painting Group, very aware of the historical development of modern art, were certainly cognizant of contemporary discussions of primitivism in the work of early modernists. They distanced themselves, however, from artists who idealized the primitive life as a state of complete freedom from any strictures or rules, outside any concept of law or morality. Instead of irrationality and unrestrained emotion, Bistram, Jonson, and Pelton advocated a studied and carefully applied appropriation from cultures they considered less advanced. Their intent was not to approach the uninhibited freedom from Western cultural conditioning that certain of

¹⁰⁷ Simon Gikandi, “Picasso, Africa, and the Schemata of Difference.” *Modernism/Modernity* 10, no. 3, 2003: 458.

¹⁰⁸ Paul Gauguin’s travel in the South Pacific is probably the best studied example. See Griselda Pollock, *Avant-Garde Gambits, 1888-1893: Gender and the Color of art History* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992); Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Going Native: Paul Gauguin and the Invention of Primitivist Modernism,” in *The Expanding Discourse*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary Garrard (New York: Icon Editions, 1992): 312-329.

their contemporaries advocated, but to analyze the religious and aesthetic aspects of other cultures looking for knowledge to synthesize with the most advanced forms of Western culture.

Though the artists of the Transcendental Painting Group seldom spoke explicitly regarding primitivism and transculturation, Morang and Rudhyar did address these issues directly. As I discuss in subsequent chapters, Rudhyar wrote at length about the historical development of modern art and its future potential, advocating the intellectualized version of primitivism that the Transcendental Painting Group artists espoused, which he felt was an essential element in the forward progress of culture. He decried artists, however, that used shocking elements from “primitive” cultures in order to effect the “disintegration of culture,” rather than its advancement.¹⁰⁹

In one of his most important publications promoting the formation of the Transcendental Painting Group, Morang created a succinct description of the artists’ use of Native American themes in their work. His statement encapsulates many of the concepts that this dissertation questions, and thus deserves intense scrutiny:

Significantly, the American Southwest was the ground where the Transcendental group was formed... this section of the country was the seat of a culture still retaining some of the primitive impulses that more or less offer a kind of sub-conscious back-drop for the creative mind... American Indian culture has not exerted any direct influence upon the Transcendental painters; rather, paralleling the part played by Congo sculpture in relation to the Cubists, it has only served to present a background more in relation to creative progress than that of city streets.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Dane Rudhyar, *Culture, Crisis, and Creativity* (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1977), 66. See chapter three for a more extensive treatment of this subject.

¹¹⁰ Alfred Morang, “The Transcendental Painting Group, Its Origins, Foundation, Ideals and Works,” *New Mexico Daily Examiner*, 21 Aug., 1938.

As Pasquine noted, Morang's statement insufficiently characterizes the significance of Native American themes, particularly in Bistram's art, which, she argued, far exceeded the influence of "Congo sculpture" in Cubist art; Bistram included significant contextual and symbolic references that demonstrate his interest in American Indian cultures and not merely aesthetics.¹¹¹

On another level, however, Morang's implication that African art played only a background role in the art of the cubists has been challenged by numerous scholars. As Patricia Leighton has argued, Picasso and other French proponents of "Africanism" were aware of contemporary debates over the abuses of colonialism, a pressing issue commanding national attention at the time they first began introducing elements of African styles into modernist art. Leighton demonstrated that Cubist painters were not working in the contextual vacuum that Morang implies, but that "the preference for some modernists for 'primitive' cultures was as much an act of social criticism as a search for a new art."¹¹²

Another aspect of Morang's description that deserves attention is his comparison that elevates northern New Mexico, the home of a culture that still retained "primitive impulses," above the urban centers. His suggestion that the Pueblos were a better background for "creative progress than that of city streets" allies his version of modernism with theorists who decried the modern city as an insalubrious realm of inauthentic experience. T. J. Jackson Lears' concept of "antimodernism" is particularly useful in discussions of primitivism, as he demonstrated that artists associated with

¹¹¹ Pasquine, "The Politics of Redemption," 395.

¹¹² Patricia Leighton, "The White Peril and *L'art nègre*: Picasso, Primitivism, and Anticolonialism," *Art Bulletin* 72, no. 4 (Dec. 1990): 609.

modernism frequently positioned their work in opposition to various aspects of modernity.¹¹³ I make use of this concept as I describe Bisttram, Jonson, and Pelton's search for places with spiritual significance sufficient to inspire meaningful art. Though all three artists expected great innovation in both scientific and religious thought in the coming era, each of them, with varying perspectives, believed that Western society risked disaster if it abandoned ancient sources of wisdom. To Bisttram, Jonson, and Pelton, urban centers were devoid of this kind of essential, eternal knowledge. Valid creative progress, they felt, came much more readily in the allegedly timeless realm of the Pueblos.

Just as "primitivism" is a multifaceted concept subject to a diversity of expressions, "modernism" is a category that encompasses a wide range of intellectual approaches and representational strategies. Instead of a single monolithic Modernism, scholars have begun attending to smaller constituent "modernisms" representing specific and often dramatically different projects. As Dorothy Ross has written, "sorting out the relationship between these different forms of modernism and modernity has become increasingly problematic."¹¹⁴ I focus on the specifics of *how* the Transcendental Painting Group artists conceived of their art as modern, without limiting my study to the formal aspects of their work. I follow other scholars who have worked to revise historical accounts of modernism as I excavate the cultural implications of the Transcendental Painting Group's appropriation from Native American cultures. Despite

¹¹³ See T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon, 1981). Sherry L. Smith has criticized Lears' omission of any discussion of Native American influences in his construction of antimodernism in *Reimagining Indians: Native Americans through Anglo Eyes, 1880-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 8-9.

¹¹⁴ Dorothy Ross, "A Sampler of Modernisms," *Reviews in American History* 21, no. 1 (Mar. 1993): 122.

the artists' and their promoters' insistence that American Indian culture "served only to present a background more in relation to creative progress," I demonstrate that Bisttram, Jonson, and Pelton each made specific and meaningful references to Southwestern Indians in their work, which operated within a larger context involving contemporary debates about race, religion, and aesthetics.

Theosophists promoted the idea of an original "universal" religious knowledge, shared in some form by every culture.¹¹⁵ On one level, this conception underlay the Theosophists' belief in "universal brotherhood" and helped bring about very real benefits for oppressed peoples in colonial states. At the same time, however, Theosophists claimed the authority to interpret which aspects of other religions were expressions of "universal" wisdom, allowing them to maintain a position of power over the cultures from which they synthesized their new religion. Bisttram, Pelton, and Jonson each adopted similar language, describing the goal of their art as reaching, in various ways, an underlying "universal" realm, where meaning was allegedly no longer defined by any specific cultural context. In their use of the term "universal," however, the artists of the Transcendental Painting Group claimed a particular set of culturally contingent signifiers as outside the sphere of social and political discourse. The result was an art that drew from American Indian cultural practices and art traditions, but gave no voice to the original Native American artists, claiming to transcend the sphere of cultural significance and approach the level of "universal" meaning.

¹¹⁵ See Blavatsky's discussion of "universal corroboration" in *Secret Doctrine*, 1:371.

Organization of the Dissertation

In chapter two, I begin by exploring Agnes Pelton's belief that ancient wisdom was an essential component in modern religion, and trace the means by which she attempted to invoke primeval religiosity in her artwork. I address Pelton first because her work reflects many of the key themes that informed Bisttram and Jonson. In this chapter, I investigate the Theosophical discourse on cultural evolution, Blavatsky's conception of root races, and metaphysical writers' understanding of the importance of Native American cultures within this framework.

In addition, I give a new interpretation of Pelton's theory of religious aesthetics, taking into consideration her understanding of the religious function of ancient art. Pelton understood American Indian art as allowing access to a transcendent realm of "universal" knowledge. She aspired to reach this inner sphere through her own abstract paintings, and relied on her conception of Native American art as she worked.

Chapter three focuses on Emil Bisttram's encounter with Southwest Indian ceremonialism. Bisttram painted numerous images of Pueblo and Hopi ceremonial dances, which he understood as conveying the same conception of the cyclical nature of the universe that Theosophy proposed. His images of Indian dances suggest his belief in the synchrony between metaphysical and American Indian religions, asserting the truth he felt was inherent in both.

Bisttram also interpreted Native American art as representing an ideal aesthetic for communicating religious meaning through art. He asserted that Indian artists combined particular religious symbols with an overarching symbolism of "divine geometry" to convey their understanding of the spiritual forces animating nature.

Bisttram strove to reach the same result by emulating aspects of Native American art in his own work, combining metaphysical symbols with allegedly universally-significant geometrical figures.

In chapter four, I investigate Raymond Jonson's paintings on Native American themes. In his images of Ancestral Puebloan ruins, Jonson emphasized his understanding of the Indians' close connection to nature, which he believed afforded them advanced spiritual powers. Jonson portrayed Native Americans as maintaining ancient wisdom from the Atlantean era, knowledge that would be essential in the synthetic religion of the coming new age.

Jonson looked to Native American art as he developed a theory of "absolute painting," non-objective art that would allow for the direct expression of spiritual meaning without any intermediary symbolic language. He interpreted American Indian art as working on the same level, communicating through abstract formal elements. Jonson alluded to Native American design motifs in his absolute works, asserting that they constituted a precedent for religiously meaningful abstraction.

I conclude in chapter five by summarizing some of the common themes throughout all three artists' work. While Bisttram, Jonson, and Pelton each celebrated Native American cultures as possessing ancient wisdom, and viewed their art as exemplifying an ideal expression of spiritual significance, they failed to recognize the specific cultural meanings that art objects had within native traditions. Instead, they followed metaphysical religious writers in interpreting Native American art as one of many sources to combine in a new syncretic religious art. Seldom referencing any of the original artists' own conceptions of the meaning of their work or the significance of

their aesthetics, Bistram, Jonson, and Pelton synthesized a mode of transcendental painting that securely maintained the primacy of Western metaphysical religion over any of its constituent components.

Chapter Two

Agnes Pelton and the Indians of the Southwest: Ancient Wisdom and Modern Expression

The oldest member of the Transcendental Painting Group, Agnes Pelton was an established and well recognized artist when Jonson and Bisttram asked her to join. Her participation improved the organization's credibility among artists and increased the regional diversity of the group. By the time she began associating with Jonson and Bisttram in the early 1930s, she was happily situated in her home in Cathedral City, California, and the combined factors of advanced age and poor health prevented her from traveling to New Mexico.

Pelton loved the deserts of the Southwest, and found commercial success in vibrant, painterly landscapes of the region, including *California Landscape near Pasadena*, 1930 (Fig. 1). Pelton also referenced the desert in her abstract works, as in the vast, open sandy plain in *Future*, 1941 (Fig. 2). The Southwest that she celebrated in her art was of a different cultural and geographical character than high desert of northern New Mexico. Though part of the same overall cultural milieu as Jonson and Bisttram, Pelton's situation was sufficiently different to encourage a markedly distinct art. In particular, she seldom directly referenced her interest in Native American cultures in her writings on aesthetic philosophy or in her paintings. The Cahuilla Indians on whose reservation she painted were never accorded the national attention focused on the Pueblo during the early twentieth century, but their culture was nonetheless a significant influence in her art. In Pelton's view, Native Americans provided an important contribution to the synthesis of ancient wisdom in modern

Theosophy. While she seldom directly referenced them in her art, their presence resonates throughout her work in the conception of ancient spiritual knowledge that pervades her abstract paintings.

Previous scholarship has acknowledged the significance of encounters with Native American cultures, religions, and arts in the work of Bisttram and Jonson, but altogether neglected the importance of this theme in Pelton's oeuvre. I demonstrate that Pelton's search for an ideal religious art was informed by an abiding interest in the Indians of the Southwest. Their cultural values and beliefs, viewed from the standpoint of Theosophy and related metaphysical religious traditions, were an essential constituent in the expanding compendium of ancient religious knowledge that would, in Pelton's view, enlighten the West and free humanity from a descent into materialist philosophy. Furthermore, Pelton developed a theory of an ideal aesthetic for religious art, based in part on her understanding of the religious function of ancient art. Rather than conveying specific knowledge through interpretable symbols, Pelton believed that archaic artists produced work that allowed direct access to a universal spiritual reality underlying ordinary experiential reality. Pelton understood Native American artists as having utilized a similar approach and she referenced their art as she attempted to create a new, spiritually significant modern art that would allow the viewer to transcend ordinary physical experience.

Synthetic Art and Synthetic Religion

Agnes Pelton was born in Stuttgart in 1881, into a family undergoing religious upheaval. Her mother was the daughter of Elizabeth Richards Tilton, whose alleged affair with Henry Ward Beecher had been a national scandal in 1875. Elizabeth's

husband, Theodore Tilton, sued Beecher, pastor of Plymouth Church of the Brethren in Brooklyn, and one of the most famous preachers of his time. As a prominent national voice speaking against infidelity and free love, the apparent hypocrisy in Beecher's affair with Elizabeth Tilton caused a sensation in the press, and the six-month trial was among the most notorious in the late nineteenth century. Apart from the near-constant coverage in the national press, a new newspaper called the *Thunderbolt* devoted itself exclusively to the trial.¹ Elizabeth Tilton was barred from testifying at the trial because, as Beecher's lawyers argued, her defense of Beecher would have constituted an illegal act of unfaithfulness to her husband. This prevented the prosecution from directly confronting her, and the written confession she had given her husband in 1870 proved insufficient to convict Beecher—the trial ended in a hung jury.² She and her husband had separated prior to the trial, and she lived in relative seclusion in Brooklyn until her death.³

Her daughter, Florence, married William Pelton, whose chronic illness necessitated living in more salubrious European climates. He died in 1891, leaving Florence and their daughter, Agnes, in the care of Elizabeth Tilton in her Brooklyn house, until 1897. After the scandal, Elizabeth left the Congregationalist Plymouth Church of the Brethren, and joined the Plymouth Brethren; despite their similar names, the groups espoused markedly different theologies.⁴ A small minority among

¹ Richard Wightman Fox. "Intimacy on Trial: Cultural Meanings of the Beecher-Tilton Affair," in *The Power of Culture: Critical Essays in American History*, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears (University of Chicago Press, 1993): 109.

² *Ibid.*, 107.

³ Zakian, *Agnes Pelton, Poet of Nature*, 16.

⁴ Fox, 103.

contemporary American denominations, the Plymouth Brethren promoted a conservative interpretation of scripture, and advocated a life of piety and purity by strict observance of Biblical commandments. Richard Wightman Fox interpreted Tilton's radical move toward conservative theology as a means of distancing herself from accusations of immorality surrounding the Beecher trial.⁵

Agnes Pelton took a very different course; as a teenager, she chaffed at the conservative religion her grandmother had adopted. She recalled that she was "much inclined to melancholy and tears which was probably aggravated by being an only child in a household of deeply religious and perhaps unnecessarily serious people."⁶ She found relative freedom by following a nearly opposite direction, embracing the exceptionally liberal religion that she found in Theosophy. Her initial encounter with metaphysical religion likely came through her study of art; she had been tutored at home until the age of fourteen, when she began studying with Arthur Wesley Dow at the Pratt Institute. She greatly esteemed her teacher, and after she completed her certificate at Pratt, she spent the summer of 1900 as his teaching assistant at his summer school in Ipswich, Massachusetts.⁷

Dow was one of the foremost proponents of Japanese and Chinese art in the late-nineteenth century United States. He was introduced to Japanese painting by Ernest Fenollosa, then the curator of the Department of Japanese Art at the Museum of Fine

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Pelton to Rudhyar, n.d., 1934, Raymond Jonson Archives.

⁷ Sheley, "Bringing Light to Life," 20, 44.

Arts, Boston.⁸ When he began working as Fenollosa's assistant, Dow had already begun formulating a theory of aesthetics that would incorporate the best elements of Japanese and Western painting. He expressed his belief in syncretism in his 1899 manual, *Composition*, whose frontispiece featured the word "SYNTHESIS." He emphasized the Japanese concept of *notan*, or "harmony-building with dark-and-light," for which he asserted that there was no equivalent word in English, and admonished students to study Japanese artworks to better understand its significance.⁹

As was frequently the case in the late-nineteenth century, Dow's exposure to Asian art was mediated through Theosophical and other metaphysical literature on Asian religions. In addition to his position at the Museum of Fine Arts, Fenollosa was a noted scholar on Japanese religion who actually taught for a time at the Imperial University in Tokyo.¹⁰ Fenollosa distrusted Theosophy, as he considered himself a better interpreter of Buddhism than either Blavatsky or Olcott; he was a Buddhist himself, officially confirmed as a member of the Tendai sect in 1885. Despite his claims to authenticity, he espoused a combinative religion that maintained much of his earlier Christianity; Lawrence Chisolm described his religious standpoint as an "aesthetic and philosophical exploration rather than personal conversion," a "sensuous metaphysics," more than an adopted creed or practice.¹¹

⁸ Lawrence W. Chisolm, *Fenollosa: the Far East and American Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 181-183.

⁹ Arthur Wesley Dow, *Composition* (New York: Doubleday, 1924), 53-99.

¹⁰ Chisolm, 30-35.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 63-64; 104, 106.

Dow developed a similarly synthetic form of religion—and although he never joined the Theosophical Society, he was less suspicious of its aims than his mentor had been. Dow’s interest in metaphysical religion began when Sarah Farmer hired him to translate the meditations of Madame Guyon.¹² In 1903, Dow traveled throughout Asia with letters of introduction from Farmer, which he used to gain access to Indian religious figures associated with the Theosophical Society in India. Traveling with English Theosophists, he sailed on the Ganges and saw Mt. Everest.¹³

Dow’s concept of “synthesis” as a vital element in art emphasized not only the combination of Eastern and Western aesthetics, but also an attempt, in Frederick Moffat’s description, to “join ideas with emotion,” as the artist focused more on “intuition and religious emotion” than naturalistic replication of visual facts.¹⁴ For Dow, the significance of Japanese art lay not only in its unique use of light and shade, but in its direct relation to the artists’ religious ideals. Buddhist priests became painters, he noted, because “contemplation of the powers and existences of external nature, with a spiritual interpretation of them, was the main occupation of Zen thought. Nature’s lessons could be learned by bringing the soul to her, and letting it behold itself as in a mirror...”¹⁵ This religious contemplative approach to painting allowed priests to reach the zenith of the “truly artistic interpretation of nature,” fully achieving a “dramatic, mysterious, elusive tone harmony.”¹⁶

¹² Ibid., 179-180.

¹³ Frederick C. Moffat, *Arthur Wesley Dow* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1977), 103.

¹⁴ Ibid., 91.

¹⁵ Dow, 96.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Dow argued that these ideas, though better understood in Asia, were not unknown in the West; he asserted that the most successful European painters, both ancient and modern, had intuitively reached the same plane, where “religious emotion was the spring of all art-power.”¹⁷ As Richard Boyle wrote, Dow considered it his mission as a teacher to help artists of the modern West to consciously recognize the principles of Japanese art, and aid in the development of a “universal standard” that would incorporate these ideas.¹⁸

As Dow’s student at Pratt during the time that he was writing and publishing *Composition*, Agnes Pelton would have been exposed to all of these conceptions of the religious significance of art, along with an explicit understanding of the value of synthesizing styles from around the world. The driving force behind her art became the search for an aesthetic that combined elements from multiple cultures, while serving as a vehicle for uniquely personal and intuitively religious expression. Although Dow avoided defining exactly what he meant by “religious emotion” and limited his descriptions of Buddhist art practice to a vaguely described contemplative approach, Pelton developed a much more specific understanding of the relationship between art and religion as she engaged in further study of Theosophy.

Pelton’s sparse autobiographical statements are mute regarding her journey from conservative Christianity to Theosophy, but the details of her biography suggest a probable path. Shortly after her initial encounter with Asian and metaphysical religions under Dow’s tutelage, she began associating with proponents of modern art in New

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Richard J. Boyle, “Arthur Wesley Dow: American Sensei,” in *Arthur Wesley Dow: His Art and Influence*, ed. Nancy E. Green (New York: Spanierman Gallery, 1999): 77-82.

York, a social milieu in which the practice of occultism and metaphysical religions was eminently fashionable. Notably, Pelton was introduced to Mabel Dodge through a mutual acquaintance, Alice Thursby, a socialite and arts patron; by coincidence, Pelton was already a friend of Maurice Sterne before he married Dodge, and she was one of the few witnesses of their impromptu wedding.¹⁹

Mabel Dodge described her eclectic religion at the time as a mix drawn from books about “Atlantis, Rosicrucianism, the Seven Worlds of Theosophy...” and other related ideas.²⁰ Eager to expand the purview of religious thought to encompass traditions well outside the mainstream, Dodge and her associates discussed a wide range of alternative religious practices at their social gatherings. She even invited a Vedanta Swami to stay at her residence.²¹ Pelton’s friendship with Dodge grew during their time in New York, and after she moved to New Mexico in 1917, Dodge invited Pelton and Thursby to stay with her in Taos. Nancy Sheley considered this trip a crucial moment in Pelton’s life; Dodge’s example as a powerful and independent woman inspired her to seriously pursue her career as an artist. After returning to New York in the summer of 1919, she rented a studio in New York, and then, following her mother’s death the next year, she moved to a century-old windmill near Southampton, Long Island, to paint in relative seclusion.²²

¹⁹ Sheley, “Bringing Light to Life,” 78-80.

²⁰ Mabel Dodge Luhan, *Intimate Memories: the Autobiography of Mabel Dodge Luhan*, ed. Lois Palken Rudnick (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), 189.

²¹ Patricia R. Everett, *A History of Having a Great Many Times Not Continued to be Friends: the Correspondence between Mabel Dodge and Gertrude Stein, 1911-1934* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 79-80.

²² Sheley, “Bringing Light to Life,” 133, 143.

Pelton and Dodge remained in contact during the 1920s and 30s; Mabel and Tony Lujan even visited her in Cathedral City on one occasion.²³ Though Pelton continued to discuss aspects of metaphysical religion in her correspondence with Luhan, it was in relation to a new interpretation of Theosophy that she had begun to espouse after spending time with Will Levington Comfort and his loosely organized group, the “Glass Hive.”²⁴ Pelton’s friend, Emma Newton, introduced her to the group when she stayed with her at her Pasadena home for eight months in 1928-1929. The organization was not a colony, per se, as the members did not live communally, as at Katherine Tingley’s nearby Point Loma community, but was composed of a number of individuals who met regularly and discussed religion, metaphysics, and occultism.²⁵

Comfort was an ardent advocate of the value of work, and conceived of the hive as an ideal metaphor for a community of shared work with shared rewards. The work that his participants engaged in, however, was mostly literary and artistic, and the reward that he expected was increased spiritual knowledge with the potential to improve the social and physical condition of humanity.²⁶ Though Pelton was hesitant to accept

²³ Ibid., 139. Mabel Dodge became Mabel Dodge Luhan after marrying Antonio Lujan, a member of the Taos Pueblo, in 1923. Sheley argues that Pelton and Luhan shared a “developed friendship” through this period, but notes that only seven letters from Pelton exist in the Luhan Papers at the Beinecke Library, Yale University. In fact, it seems that their relationship gradually diminished during this time. In 1933, Pelton wrote to Raymond Jonson asking if Luhan had seen her paintings exhibited in Santa Fe; she wrote that “Long ago I spent a winter with her in Taos—knew her also in N. Y.,” a use of the past tense that seems telling, especially given the fact that Pelton was writing Jonson rather than Luhan herself. Pelton to Jonson, 31 Dec., 1933, Raymond Jonson Archives. Vera Jonson wrote back saying that neither she nor Raymond were “in touch” with Luhan. Vera Jonson to Pelton, 15 Jan., 1934, Raymond Jonson Archives.

²⁴ As Sheley has noted, although Pelton meant to introduce Luhan to Comfort, they had actually already met in 1919, and were in correspondence. “Bringing Light to Life,” 197.

²⁵ Ibid., 194.

²⁶ Will Levington Comfort, *Midstream: a Chronicle at Halfway* (New York: George H. Doran, 1914), 309.

Comfort as a spiritual leader—she wrote to Luhan that he was egotistical and often drunk—she nonetheless felt “an especial pull in [his] direction.”²⁷ She did not participate in the group after she returned from Pasadena, but Comfort’s ideas held lasting significance to her. Long after her experience with the Glass Hive, Pelton was still a close friend of Jane Comfort, Will Levington Comfort’s daughter, and the group’s ideas about art and religion remained important themes throughout her career.²⁸

Another significant influence came as a result of participating in the Glass Hive, as she met modernist composer, astrologist, philosopher, author, and painter, Dane Rudhyar. Rudhyar was in close contact with the Glass Hive, and married Marla Contento, Comfort’s secretary, in 1930. In addition to introducing Pelton to Emil Bistram and Raymond Jonson, Rudhyar also familiarized her with the writing of Nicholas and Helena Roerich.²⁹ Pelton avidly read their works on Agni Yoga, a metaphysical system that was heavily indebted to Theosophy, but followed a much more mystical bent, avoiding Blavatsky’s quasi-scientific rationalization of spiritual phenomena.³⁰

While Theosophy, through the lenses of the Glass Hive and Agni Yoga, formed the core of Pelton’s belief system, she was typical of many contemporary Theosophists in her constant search for new modes of thought. Later in her life, she traveled to hear lectures by Krishnamurti, who had been recognized as a child in Adyar, India, by Annie

²⁷ Pelton to Mabel Dodge Luhan, 27 Sep. 1928, quoted in Sheley, “Bringing Light to Life,” 205.

²⁸ See Letters from Agnes Pelton to Jane Levington Comfort (Jane Annixter) 1934-1959, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

²⁹ Sheley, “Bringing Light to Life,” 21.

³⁰ See Nicholas and Helena Roerich, *Agni Yoga* (New York: Agni Yoga Society, 1924).

Besant as the next “world-teacher”; attended a talk by Virginia Foster, an authority on the Baha’i faith; written to friends about the arrival of the Armenian faith-healer, Avak Hagopian, in Palm Springs; and entertained visitors at her studio from Katherine Tingley’s Theosophical center in Point Loma.³¹ Perhaps the most dramatic move in her search for religious truth, however, was her decision to relocate from the East Coast, where she had spent nearly her entire life, to a tiny town in the Southern California desert.

Shambhala in the Southwest

To many of her associates, Pelton’s decision to move to the inland Southern California desert seemed inexplicable. Most of her friends and family lived in the New York area, and her associates from the Glass Hive in Pasadena were still over a hundred miles away, a considerable journey at the time.³² Even in her isolated Long Island studio, she had ready access to the galleries of New York City; after she relocated to Cathedral City, however, she began shipping her abstract works to New York, given the virtually nonexistent market for modernist painting in the Palm Springs area at the

³¹ Sheley, 218-220. During the 1920s, Krishnamurti had left the Theosophical Society, disavowed his role as a “world teacher” and begun promoting his own religious ideas in speaking tours across the United States, Europe, and Asia. Though he based many of his beliefs on Theosophy, he advocated direct and individual experience of the divine without any intermediary. See Mary Lutyens, *Krishnamurti: the Years of Awakening* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1975).

A wealthy vintner in Palm Springs, Krikor Arakelian, brought Avak Hagopian to heal his epileptic son in May of 1947; widespread publicity elicited “scores of elderly and infirm persons” to flock to Palm Springs in hopes of being healed. See “Avak, the Healer, Brings Problems to Palm Springs,” *Milwaukee Journal*, May 21, 1947: 4. Sheley misidentifies Hagopian as “the Armenian Healer Avail” in “Bringing Light to Life,” 219.

³² Pelton complained to Jonson about the difficulty of traveling even to nearby Palm Springs in a letter of 19 Dec., 1948, Raymond Jonson Archives.

time.³³ Some of her reasons for leaving the East Coast were purely practical—Sheley suggested that the stock market crash of 1929 dramatically attenuated her market for portraiture, freeing her to paint whatever subjects she chose.³⁴

Clearly, her decision to move was based on more than just economic motives. By 1930, she had grown restless in Long Island and felt compelled to move to a place with more spiritual significance; as she described in her journal in an entry of Aug. 28, 1930, pondering the possibility of relocating, “I need an opportunity remaining always connected to the ‘source.’” In the margin, she wrote, “Shambhala.”³⁵ The “source” had dual meaning for Pelton, referring at once to the inner connection to divinity, the spiritual essence that permeated the universe, as well as to a physical wellspring from which perceptible glimpses of that essence might emanate. She was searching not only for a location to be productive as an artist, but for a place that would be her own Shambhala, the archetypal utopia.

Pelton’s spiritual teachers had made their own attempts to find Shambhala, both as a physical location and as an emotional, mental, and spiritual state. Driven by Blavatsky’s assertion that ancient knowledge from archaic periods was preserved in Shambhala, a city hidden in the Gobi desert, Nicholas and Helena Roerich went on an expedition through central Asia searching for the its physical location.³⁶ During their

³³ As Zakian noted, Pelton continued to market her art in New York until 1949. See his chronology of Pelton’s career in *Agnes Pelton, Poet of Nature*, 123.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 160.

³⁵ Agnes Pelton Journal, Aug. 28, 1930, Agnes Pelton Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [3426: 0584].

³⁶ See Ruth Adams Drayer, *Nicholas and Helena Roerich: the Spiritual Journey of Two Great Artists and Peacemakers* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 2005). Blavatsky refers to Shambhala in *Secret Doctrine*, 2:319, 400.

journey, they came to realize that the Shambhala would only be accessible on Earth after the combined wisdom of the world's religions had initiated a new era of peace and understanding.³⁷

Shambhala was also meaningful to Will Levington Comfort, as the place where the White Council resided, the advanced individuals who Blavatsky claimed lead the progress of humanity on Earth.³⁸ To Comfort, however, Shambhala was also the "Inner Temple," a location accessible only through inward concentration; once a person, "only a most pure and potent messenger," had learned to access this spiritual place, they could approach those who are "holding the cup continually for revelation, guiding and guarding humanity's soul," and receive wisdom with the responsibility of sharing it with the world.³⁹ Comfort believed that this was the source of inspiration for the greatest artists, and admonished those seeking to provide humanity with truly uplifting art to connect with this inner Shambhala, the source of profound revelation. "The more of an artist a man is," he wrote, "the more reverent he becomes about perfecting his thought-forms."⁴⁰

Pelton sought both the internal and external Shambhala. As both Comfort and Pelton recognized, some physical locations were better than others for seeking the clarity of mind that could grant access to spiritual realms. The deserts of the Southwest provided ample space for meditation far from the presence of any human intervention in the landscape. Pelton believed that living away from the distractions of civilization, she

³⁷ Drayer, 84.

³⁸ See Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine*, 2:319, 400.

³⁹ Will Levington Comfort, *The Hive* (New York: George H. Doran, 1914), 208.

⁴⁰ Comfort, *The Hive*, 8.

could better access the “Inner Temple” of revelation. She wrote in her application for a Guggenheim grant in 1932 that the California desert would reflect the “abstract beauty of the inner vision, which would be kindled by the inspiration of these rare and solitary places.”⁴¹ She sought out Cathedral City as her own Shambhala, the place where she could stay “connected to the source.”

To aid in accessing the inner Shambhala, Pelton built a meditation room in her Cathedral City studio. She felt that meditation provided her with the ability to transcend the boundaries of physical space and experience a glimpse of higher realms. As she described to Jane Comfort, when she meditated, “it seemed as if all the bricks of the wall stretched, or cracked slightly, showing a slight radiance through...”⁴² It was the combined power of the physical space in which she lived, and the spiritual plane she reached through meditative practice that brought her to what she recognized as the “Inner Temple.” If Cathedral City were not *the* geographical Shambhala that Roerich sought, it was nonetheless Pelton’s portal of access. Her letters describing her love for the desert and her sense of belonging in Cathedral City suggest that she felt she succeeded in finding her Shambhala; after arriving in 1930, she never left.⁴³

Another aspect that attracted Pelton to the California desert was the presence of American Indians maintaining traditional cultures. Although the Indians in Southern California were not nearly as well recognized as those in northern New Mexico, they were a very important presence locally. Cathedral City is located partially within the

⁴¹ Quoted in Sheley, 51. Pelton’s grant request was denied, as she was apparently unaware that the purpose of the grant was to fund a year of work outside of the United States.

⁴² Pelton to Jane Levington Comfort, 26 Nov., 1944, Letters from Agnes Pelton to Jane Levington Comfort (Jane Annixter) 1934-1959, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁴³ Zakian, *Agnes Pelton, Poet of Nature*, 67.

Agua Caliente Cahuilla reservation, and tribal members have played an important role in the area economy and government. Since efforts to establish economic independence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Cahuillas have operated stores, cultivated commercial orchards, and produced various types of crafts and jewelry for the tourist trade.⁴⁴

Pelton was personally familiar with some of the Cahuilla, as she often drove to their reservation to paint landscapes.⁴⁵ Her papers give regrettably few details about her relationships with individuals there, but they do show that she knew some of them on a first name basis: she identified those present with her in a photograph that she sent to Vera Jonson in 1934.⁴⁶ Even in Cathedral City, it is likely that Pelton would have come into frequent contact with members of the Cahuilla tribe, as they were a significant part of the local population.

Pelton's conception of the Southern California Indians was shaped by her friend, Mary Austin, who had grown up in the California Mojave. Although Pelton may have met Austin in New York previously, the two were both guests at Mabel Dodge's house in Taos at the same time in 1919. Austin wrote an introduction for Pelton's show of pastel drawings at the Museum of New Mexico in April of 1919, and provided a letter of recommendation for Pelton's application for a Guggenheim grant in 1932.⁴⁷ Austin's

⁴⁴ See Lowell John Bean and Lisa Bourgeault, *The Cahuilla* (New York: Chelsea House, 1989). The Agua Caliente band of the Cahuilla remain an important economic presence in Riverside County, operating two casinos.

⁴⁵ Karen Moss, "Art and Life Illuminated: Georgia O'Keeffe and Agnes Pelton, Agnes Martin and Florence Miller Pierce," in *Illumination: the Paintings of Georgia O'Keeffe, Agnes Pelton, Agnes Martin, and Florence Miller Pierce*, ed. Karen Moss (London: Merrell, 2009), 17.

⁴⁶ Pelton to Vera Jonson, 6 Feb., 1934, Raymond Jonson Archives.

⁴⁷ Sheley, "Bringing Light to Life," 140-141.

Land of Little Rain (1903), described the Native Americans as having perfected their relationship with one of the harshest natural environments. She wrote of the region, “Desert is the name it wears upon the maps, but the Indian’s is the better word.”⁴⁸ Throughout Austin’s work, the desert is pervaded by the presence of the Indians, whether in her explanation of place names, or in her description of the uses of local flora and fauna. The sense that the region’s native inhabitants were always present in the landscape informed Pelton’s work as she began creating abstract compositions that included the deserts of the Southwest as emblematic of poignant religious significance.

Past and *Future*: Ancient Ruins in Pelton’s Abstract Paintings

On superficial examination, Pelton’s work seems to bear very little evidence of her encounter with the Cahuilla and her proximity to their society. Pelton’s landscapes depicting their reservation show few signs of inhabitation, and her abstractions include none of the obvious references to Indian cultures and arts that her associates, Bistram and Jonson, frequently utilized. Many of her paintings, however, portray subtle but deeply meaningful allusions to her sense of the place of Native American arts, cultures, and religions within the broad combinative system of Theosophy.

In *Future*, Pelton depicted a barren desert landscape, with a distant mountain peak framed by two stone pillars, crossed by red and blue zig-zag lines. Beyond the pillars, four patches of brilliant light hovering in the sky open into a realm of intense white light. Pelton described the work in her notes as “a kind of ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’ through darkness and oppression, across a stony desert...” At the end of the path were

⁴⁸ Mary Austin, *Land of Little Rain* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903), 3.

“windows of illumination.”⁴⁹ By invoking John Bunyan’s seventeenth century allegorical text, Pelton related her image to an exceptionally familiar trope in American art and literature, but reworked the terms of the allegory to fit her metaphysical religious perspective. *Future* is a metaphor for the spiritual journey from the darkness of materialist doubt to the revelatory illumination of metaphysical religion. The path from the foreground to the mountain in the distance, leading up into the celestial light above, mirrors Pelton’s conception of her own spiritual quest, searching for a source of inner light, the “Inner Temple” that Comfort described.

The pillars, which Pelton described as “not heavy but solid, built up of stone-like forms,” seem not to quite touch the ground—the bricks fade away gradually toward the bottom, leaving the columns suspended in air. This was apparently Pelton’s manner of making them appear “not heavy”; Zakian suggested that the pillars refer to the necessity of surpassing “brute physicality,” a common conception in Theosophical thought.⁵⁰ The incomplete appearance of the rockwork further suggests that the architectural forms are ruins, remnants of an archaic civilization. Zakian also asserted that the columns “allude to an ancient culture—a repository of non-western wisdom granting spiritual transcendence.”⁵¹

Pelton likely had in mind the twin columns of the temple at Jerusalem, Jachin and Boaz, which were referenced frequently in Theosophical literature. As the pillars guarded the sanctuary of the temple, Pelton may have included them to signify the

⁴⁹ Agnes Pelton notebooks, Agnes Pelton Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [3427:192, 3426:805].

⁵⁰ Zakian, *Agnes Pelton, Poet of Nature*, 93.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

sacredness of the space beyond, and to allude to her conception of the “Inner Temple” as the source of revelation. Perhaps more importantly, the pillars symbolized the underlying agreement of all ancient religions. As Theosophist Paul F. Case wrote, they were incorporated in religious art from around the world, tying together Hermetic, early Christian, Judaic, and Egyptian philosophies, finding modern expression in Tarot and Masonic imagery.⁵²

More specifically, the pillars allude to the ancient inhabitants of the desert in which Pelton’s modernist “Pilgrim’s Progress” takes place. Pelton did not depict the columns as part of any ancient temple, but as elements standing alone in the empty California desert that inspired many of her abstractions. This fact alone suggests that Pelton included the Native Americans of the Southwest in her understanding of the combined wisdom of antiquity. She may also have had local ruins in mind when she painted *Future*; in the Cahuilla reservation, numerous remnants of structures made from rough desert rocks mark faintly discernable geometric forms in the landscape, as in Edward Curtis’s photograph, “Remains of Ancient Fish-Pounds,” 1924 (Fig. 3) which was reproduced in *The North American Indian*.⁵³ The structure Pelton depicted in *Future* interrupts the visual monotony of the desert in a similar fashion, forming the only clear geometry or evidence of human activity in the painting.

Whether or not Pelton consciously alluded to the architectural remnants she would have encountered in the Cahuilla reservation, she certainly considered ancient Native American ruins emblematic of the lost wisdom of antiquity that she believed

⁵² Paul F. Case, “The Secret Doctrine of the Tarot,” *Word* 25, no. 1 (Apr., 1917): 18.

⁵³ Edward S. Curtis, *The North American Indian, vol. 15: Southern California Shoshoneans; the Diegueños; Plateau Shoshoneans; the Washo* (Seattle: Curtis, 1924), 27.

Theosophy and related traditions recovered. In a letter to Jane Levington Comfort, she wrote that while meditating, she had envisioned a “shape that looked like a piece of Aztec carving—a sculptural block—perhaps from some building, a temple, or maybe an altar.”⁵⁴ She even drew a sketch of it in the text of the letter (Fig. 4). Pelton was not certain what the image had meant, but she recognized it as a powerful form, something from the distant past with, if no clear significance, at least a sense of importance that came with its ancient origin.

The distinct notched shape of the Aztec carving resembles the tops of the columns in *Future*, especially the one on the right. It also suggests the shape of a ruined structure in another work by Pelton, *Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*, c. 1940 (Fig. 5). Much as in *Future*, the painting depicts a grouping of geometric elements in an empty desert, though in this case, the forms are partially obscured by blowing sand. The word “yesterday” in the title seems to refer to the ruins—with no evidence of what structure they may have originally composed, their meaning seems completely effaced by time, almost as if it were blasted away by the blowing sand. In the distance, however, as in *Future*, glowing celestial forms promise the restoration of meaning in the attainment of ultimate knowledge—the goal of “tomorrow.” One might read the painting, like *Future*, as a metaphor of the journey toward enlightenment, the goal of today being to learn from yesterday in order to reach the bliss of tomorrow.

⁵⁴ Pelton to Jane Levington Comfort, 24 Aug., 1933, Letters from Agnes Pelton to Jane Levington Comfort (Jane Annixter) 1934-1959, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Though the Aztec empire did not extend into northern New Mexico, recent discoveries of trade between the Ancestral Puebloans and the Aztecs linked the two cultures closely in contemporary scholarship. See, for example, Edgar L. Hewett, *Ancient Life in the American Southwest* (New York: Tudor, 1948), 369-372.

Pelton's emphasis on chronology reflects the fact that her conceptions of the past and the future were crucial aspects of her religious belief. As a Theosophist, she recognized the importance of the knowledge of the past, an essential ingredient in the synthesis of the world's religious traditions. Theosophy also provided Pelton with a sense that the future was not up to chance, but followed a predetermined evolutionary cycle. In Pelton's view, the history of past civilizations not only evidenced the cyclical patterns through which Western society was moving, but provided essential knowledge to help ensure the successful evolutionary process, furnishing necessary wisdom to help modern civilizations learn from the difficult lessons of the past and avoid repeating mistakes. She learned from her study of metaphysical religion that the world was moving through a definite chronological progression leading ultimately toward a new, enlightened era. Both *Future and Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* demonstrate Pelton's belief in the cyclical nature of human existence, a concept that had a significant influence in her understanding of how the modern West could learn from Native American cultures.

“Cultural Evolution” in Science and Theosophy

Although Blavatsky and her associates wrote relatively little about Native Americans, when later Theosophists attempted to interpret American Indian religious ideas, they borrowed many of the concepts that their predecessors had originally written describing cultures of Asia. Pelton, who began studying Theosophy around the turn of the twentieth century, would have been exposed to all of these ideas as they unfolded in Theosophical literature. Her perception of the spiritual significance of the Southwest was dependent not only on Theosophical accounts of the importance of Native

American cultures, but on their ideas about ancient religions in general, many of which were developed in response to Asian religions.

Blavatsky and her followers directly confronted late nineteenth century scientific racism as they argued that Asian cultures were in many ways superior to Western society.⁵⁵ In other respects, however, Theosophical writers capitulated to established stereotypes, which, buttressed by alleged scientific evidence, erected formidable obstacles to the society's commitment to "universal brotherhood." In practice, Theosophy maintained deeply ambivalent perspectives regarding non-Western cultures. Despite the fact that the Theosophical Society was among the most liberal advocates of racial equality among turn of the century religious organizations, they fashioned their official understanding of racial difference under the influence of a contemporary scientific academy in which, as Helen Carr wrote, "unselfconscious racism was the norm."⁵⁶

Blavatsky's first major work, *Isis Unveiled*, 1877, alluded to the significance of Asian philosophy, but focused on more traditional subjects of Western esotericism. *The Secret Doctrine*, 1888, however, sparked a revolution in metaphysical religion by directly addressing Asian religious beliefs; the book was organized as a commentary on the *Stanzas of Dzyan*, an alleged volume in the extinct language of Senzar which Blavatsky claimed to have studied while traveling in Tibet.⁵⁷ In 1878, she and Henry Steel Olcott, cofounder and first president of the Theosophical Society, traveled to India

⁵⁵ See Prothero, *The White Buddhist*.

⁵⁶ Carr, 202.

⁵⁷ See Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine* 1:xx, xxii, xxxiv.

and Ceylon; the headquarters of the Theosophical Society were officially moved to Adyar, India, the following year.⁵⁸

During their travels in South Asia, Blavatsky and Olcott aroused significant ire from the British colonial government by promoting the study of indigenous religions and actively opposing Christian missionary efforts in the region. Olcott achieved lasting fame in Sri Lanka for his Buddhist Catechism, which was enormously influential and widely used in Sri Lankan schools.⁵⁹ He helped spur a revival of Buddhism on the Island, contesting missionaries' claims of Christianity's moral superiority. In India, he and Blavatsky promoted the study of traditional Hindu religion in local schools.⁶⁰ Following Olcott, and in contradistinction to contemporary cultural evolutionists, Theosophists encouraged the preservation of local cultures and religions, and argued against the synonymy of Westernization and progress.

Annie Besant, Olcott's successor as president of the Theosophical Society in Adyar, continued his program of opposing Western incursion, but engaged the Society directly in the political effort at gaining Indian home-rule. Blavatsky and Olcott already had limited experience in Indian colonial politics, as they elicited the support of Dayananda Sarasvati, founder of the Arya Samaj, a Hindu reform organization that became important in the nascent home-rule movement.⁶¹ Besant continued this program by referring to the Theosophical teaching of the harmony of the world's

⁵⁸ Prothero, "Henry Steel Olcott and "Protestant Buddhism,"" 285.

⁵⁹ Prothero, *The White Buddhist*, 100-101.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁶¹ Mark Bevir, "Theosophy and the Origins of the Indian National Congress," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 7, no. 1 (Feb., 2003): 104-105.

religions to appeal to Indians of diverse cultural backgrounds to work together in their struggle for independence. Though she was criticized in India for her moderate position, and in Britain for opposing the colonial government, she was an important voice in the Indian National Congress, which she joined in 1914, and to which she was elected president, at the age of seventy, in 1917.⁶²

In other respects, however, the Theosophists were influenced by contemporary notions of Western prepotency. This was especially evident in their judgments of which practices and traditions in Asian religions expressed an elevated spirituality, and which were morally questionable; the latter they proscribed as later accretions or degradations. Olcott, in fact, considered contemporary Hinduism and Buddhism “but brutalizations of their primal types.”⁶³ This gave him the leeway to condemn various cultural practices in Asia while insisting that his own understanding of indigenous traditions surpassed that of local leaders and practitioners. “Olcott’s uncritical and unconscious appropriation of... academic Orientalism,” Stephen Prothero observed, “led him to the rather absurd conclusion that Ceylon’s Buddhists knew little, if anything, about ‘real’ Buddhism. Like his hated missionaries and his beloved Orientalists, Olcott assumed the right to define what Buddhism really was.”⁶⁴ Theosophists frequently failed to recognize the ways in which their own programs intended to promote local religions actually acted as agents of Westernization. Olcott’s *Buddhist Catechism*, for example,

⁶² See Joanne Stafford Mortimer, “Annie Besant and India, 1913-1917,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 18, no. 1 (Jan., 1983): 61-78; Peter Robb, “The Government of India and Annie Besant,” *Modern Asian Studies* 10, no. 1 (1976): 107-130; W. Travis Hanes III, “On the Origins of the Indian National Congress: a Case Study of Cross-Cultural Synthesis,” *Journal of World History* 4, no. 1 (Spring, 1993): 69-98.

⁶³ Quoted in Prothero, *The White Buddhist*, 144.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 101.

interpreted Buddhism through the lens of late-nineteenth century liberal Protestantism, advocating a hybrid, imported belief system, despite Olcott's intentions.

Annie Besant held similarly selective views about authenticity in Hindu traditions; while she argued that Hinduism encompassed vast stores of religious truth that had been lost to the West, she also asserted that many Indian cultural practices were contrary to the true spirit of ancient Hinduism, and ought to be abolished. Reflecting her commitment to liberal social causes in her earlier advocacy of Socialism in England, she sought to overthrow the caste system, eliminate racial hierarchies, and end all arranged marriages.⁶⁵ As progressive as Besant's ideals were, they were predicated on the supposition that she had the knowledge or authority to interpret Hinduism better than any of its Indian practitioners. In addition, V. Geetha and S. V. Rajadurai have written on the apparent hypocrisy in Besant's attempt, on the one hand, to abolish the caste system, but on the other, to appeal to Indian luminaries of the Brahmin class by praising them in transparently exclusivist language; in one instance, she wrote that "the brain of the average brahmana compared with the average of any other class in the world is superior."⁶⁶ Mark Bevir wrote that, despite Besant's commitment to "universal brotherhood," her work in India "had an elitist ring to it; the emphasis was on an intellectual elite organizing society for the good of all, technocrats doing their duty by the poor."⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Mortimer, 64.

⁶⁶ V. Geetha and S. V. Rajadurai, "One Hundred Years of Brahminitude: Arrival of Annie Besant," *Economic and Political Weekly* 30, no. 28 (Jul 15, 1995): 1768. 1768-1773.

⁶⁷ Mark Bevir, "Annie Besant's Quest for Truth," 91.

While Blavatsky, Olcott, Besant, and their associates in the Theosophical Society were instrumental in changing Western perceptions of Asian religions in a positive way, as well as in effecting measurable political progress against Western colonialism, they were nonetheless outside observers of indigenous cultures whose interpretations were neither largely accurate nor uniformly laudatory. They privileged the allegedly ancient cultures of South Asia, considering them spiritually superior to the West, but in other respects, they clearly favored their own Western societies. This deep ambivalence was a frequent characteristic of Theosophical approaches to non-Western cultures, and continued in the work of later Theosophists who turned their attention to allegedly ancient societies within the United States.

Turning from East to West: Cultural Evolution in America

Theosophists had focused on Asian religions during the first decades after the society's organization, but around 1915, they began writing extensively about Native American cultures. In the years that followed, Theosophy as an organization underwent a gradual but significant decline, and various offshoots experienced tremendous growth. Nonetheless, Theosophy remained the organizing structure for the majority of these groups, providing core beliefs for diverse metaphysical religions throughout the twentieth century.⁶⁸ Thus, as occult and New Age writers turned their attention to Native American cultures and religions, they incorporated a number of the key themes

⁶⁸ See Hammer, esp. 51-54.

that Theosophists had already established in their approach to Asian religions in the late-nineteenth century.⁶⁹

Central to these were the twin propositions that indigenous cultures preserved ancient wisdom that was once known world-wide, and that the excavation and study of this wisdom would be an essential endeavor in furthering the evolutionary progression of humanity. The idea that people and cultures evolved was a key concept in Theosophy and derivative metaphysical traditions; Olav Hammer described it as a philosophy of “meliorism,” “the concept that history goes forward and that people and cultures progress.”⁷⁰ This theory allowed Theosophists to explain the progression of cultures and religions in successive periods of ascendancy not as an accident of history but as an expression of universal law. As Hammer asserted, “such a basic schema does not so much derive from the empirical facts of history, as provide a framework within which historical events can be understood.”⁷¹ Thus, Theosophical studies of world cultures seldom emphasized the objective analysis of scientific evidence, but drew selectively from existing amateur as well as scholarly accounts, making liberal interpretative leaps to fit particular cultures’ histories to the pre-existing patterns which Theosophists understood all societies as conforming.⁷²

The Theosophical conception of evolution traces back to Blavatsky’s attempt to reconcile late nineteenth century science with her view of liberal, “universal” religion.

⁶⁹ Philip Jenkins, *Dream Catchers: How Mainstream America Discovered Native Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 136-140.

⁷⁰ Hammer, 51.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁷² See Jenkins, esp. 10-12, 138-140.

Blavatsky first expounded her evolutionary world view in the *Secret Doctrine*. She described a vast cosmology in which the world and its inhabitants move through a cyclical progression of states of being; the seven iterations of the world, called “planetary rounds,” are each divided into seven “root races,” temporal rather than ethnic divisions that succeed each other until the beginning of a new planetary round. As Blavatsky wrote, in any one era, essentially all people belong to a particular root race, which, after completing its progress, would be replaced by another. Most individuals would be reincarnated in every successive root race, allowing them to accumulate knowledge and experience from one lifetime to the next.⁷³

In Blavatsky’s cosmology, the cycle of seven root races that make up each Planetary Round begins with the most spiritual and the least physical; as they advance through the seven root races, they become successively more corporeal until they reach a spiritual nadir near the midpoint. From that point on, the evolutionary trajectory would reverse itself and the root races then progress spiritually while becoming increasingly less attached to physicality. Although Blavatsky clearly privileged the spiritual over the physical, she nonetheless considered corporeal existence essential to the evolution of each individual. As she argued, it is only by undergoing the experiences unique to physical existence that a fundamentally spiritual being can reach its maximum potential. In this cosmology, by the time the evolutionary cycle has completed a full circuit from spiritual to physical and back to spiritual, every being in

⁷³ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine*, 2:146.

the universe will have increased in both knowledge and spiritual capacity, and will then enter yet another Planetary Round composed of seven new root races.⁷⁴

Blavatsky insisted on the scientific veracity of her propositions, and explicitly posited this series of ascending and descending “arcs” as a religious contest to Darwinian evolution. She was eager to use the term “evolution” to describe her conception of the unalterable progression of the universe, and promoted her synthesis of metaphysical and scientific concepts of evolution as a vital element of her attempt to reconcile science and religion through Theosophy.⁷⁵ Indeed, a significant appeal of Theosophy to those who had become disaffected with Christianity was Blavatsky’s qualified acceptance of contemporary science; rather than denying the possibility of evolution, she reinterpreted it in a religious framework, using her version of the concept to argue for a vast and progressive universal scheme that promised the potential for the eternal improvement of all humanity.⁷⁶

While Blavatsky accepted Darwin’s general conception that species change and adapt over time, she denied that random mutation drove the process. In her teleological perspective, evolution operated progressively rather than randomly, working toward universal improvement as a result of ineradicable natural law. She disavowed Darwin’s presupposition of a procession from the lowest to the highest forms of existence; Blavatsky saw the process of evolution as cyclical, but ultimately upward-moving, and considered the present state of humanity as a relative low point, having devolved from a

⁷⁴ Ibid., 1:225, 218-219.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 1:218-219.

⁷⁶ See Hammer, 254-255.

more spiritually advanced state. As she wrote, “All things had their origin in spirit— evolution having originally begun from above and proceeded downward, instead of the reverse, as taught in the Darwinian theory. In other words, there has been a gradual materialization of forms until a fixed ultimate of debasement is reached.” This reverse-Darwinian evolution, as Blavatsky saw it, would change course as a new root race came into being and the arc began to swing back upward.⁷⁷

Blavatsky insisted on complete racial equality in her statement of the Theosophical Society’s mission to “form the nucleus of a Universal Brotherhood of Humanity without distinction of race, colour, or creed.”⁷⁸ She emphasized that her use of the term “root race” to distinguish between different evolutionary levels did not imply that certain cultures were less physically evolved than others. Despite her anti-racist agenda, Blavatsky nonetheless wrote that while nearly all of the world’s inhabitants were members of the fifth root race, a few ethnicities were actually remnants of previous root races. There were no clear boundaries between the root races, she held, meaning that small populations of one root race might continue to live long after the advent of the next.⁷⁹

In the present day, she asserted, there were remnants of the third root race, the Lemurians, who had once inhabited the eponymous continent which occupied the space now filled by the Indian Ocean.⁸⁰ Borrowing from the work of contemporary racist

⁷⁷ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine*, 2:190, 300.

⁷⁸ Blavatsky, *Key to Theosophy*, 28.

⁷⁹ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine*, 2:443-444.

⁸⁰ Blavatsky adapted the concept of “Lemuria” from contemporary science, as well—a number of scholars in the 1860s and 70s argued that the presence of lemurs in Africa as well as Asia evinced a

anthropologists, she argued that these were the least “evolved” cultures in remaining in the world: the Australian Aborigines, Andaman Islanders, African “Bushmen” and Southeast Asian “Negritos.” These cultures, she wrote, were a mix of the third and fourth root races.⁸¹ Still following the accepted scientific hierarchies, she held that the Native Americans and Mongolians were the last remnants of the fourth root race, the “Atlanteans,” whose destruction by flood precipitated the rise of the first fifth-race civilizations, the “Aryans” in India and Egypt.⁸²

Blavatsky’s pseudoscientific cosmology, proffered in direct competition with Darwinism, challenged scientific materialists with an alternate explanation of the process of evolution. Hers was a teleological progress that worked according to a universal plan directed by the divine force permeating all matter. In her acceptance of the general principles of evolution, however, she also acceded to the theories promulgated by contemporary cultural evolutionists, anthropologists, sociologists, and others who applied the principles of Darwinism to the historical development of world cultures.

Prior to the advent of Boas’ promotion of cultural relativism and historical particularism, which did not gain widespread acceptance in anthropology until after the First World War, scholars assumed that Western society was the most technologically

former land bridge or continent that existed where the Indian Ocean lies at present. See Hammer, 100-101.

⁸¹ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine*, 2:195.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 2:249-250. On Blavatsky’s use of the term “Aryan,” see Robert Cowan, *The Indo-German Identification: Reconciling South Asian Origins and European Destinies, 1765-1885* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2010), 178.

advanced, and had therefore reached a higher point on an evolutionary scale.⁸³ Aldona Jonaitis summarized the position of cultural evolutionism:

Evolutionist anthropologists applied what is called the “comparative method,” which equated prehistoric groups with living primitive societies... As they progressed toward civilized perfection, following a course strictly governed by universal rules, all ethnic groups passed through the same stages. As a result, even groups geographically distant from one another shared similar manifestations in areas as diverse as social structure, technology, and art style.⁸⁴

Thus, late-nineteenth and early twentieth century scholars provided an ostensibly scientific explanation for cultural diversity that ranked societies around the world in terms of their evolutionary advancement, with the Western world as the unchallenged apex.

Although Blavatsky and her followers argued for a significantly different understanding of the evolution of cultures, their writing still strongly reflected the position of contemporary scientists. The peoples whom Blavatsky singled out as remnants of the Lemurian root race were the same ones that Lewis Henry Morgan, among the most eminent late nineteenth century anthropologists, relegated the status of “savage” in his tripartite classification system of “savagery,” “barbarism,” and “civilization.”⁸⁵ Blavatsky positioned the American Indians as one root race further evolved, the last of the Atlanteans. Likewise, Morgan classed the American Indians as belonging to the next stage up on the evolutionary scale—their use of pottery and domesticated livestock placed them in the state of “barbarism.” The Aryan root race,

⁸³ Kuper, 133.

⁸⁴ Aldona Jonaitis, introduction to *A Wealth of Thought: Franz Boas on Native American Art*, by Franz Boas, ed. Aldona Jonaitis (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 4.

⁸⁵ Lewis Henry Morgan, *Ancient Society* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1910) 3-12.

Blavatsky argued, began with the cultures that Morgan deemed the first to reach the status of “civilization,” characterized by the development of a phonetic alphabet for keeping written records.⁸⁶

The connection that Blavatsky theorized between American Indian and Mongolian cultures was also a response to contemporary anthropology. Morgan was among the first scholars to promote the theory that Native Americans had populated the Western Hemisphere by migrating across the Bering Strait in the prehistoric era. Beginning in 1870, Morgan drew on the work of Schoolcraft, Haven, and others, to give credence to the migration theory, which had been proposed as early as the sixteenth century by Spanish writers.⁸⁷ Morgan and subsequent researchers used apparent similarities in physiognomy between East Asian and Native American people to argue that they had common ethnic origins in the distant past.

Many actually identified the Mongolians specifically as the closest Asian relatives of the American Indians, based on superficial comparisons between common facial features and cultural practices; these ideas persisted well into the twentieth century, often built on nothing more than the supposition that since both peoples were stereotypically expert horse-riders, they must be genetically connected.⁸⁸ Thus, in suggesting that the Mongolians and Native Americans were related, Blavatsky was

⁸⁶ Ibid., 11-12.

⁸⁷ Kuper, 68. This issue remains contentious within Native American studies, as numerous indigenous groups feel the Bering Strait migration theory is scientifically inadequate and disrespectful of native traditions. See Vine Deloria, Jr., *Red Earth, White Lies: Native Americans and the Myth of Scientific Fact* (New York: Scribner, 1995), esp. 67-92.

⁸⁸ See Edward D. Cope and J. S. Kingsley, “Archaeology and Anthropology,” *The American Naturalist* 22 (1888): 850; Aleš Hrdlička, “The Anthropological Problems of the Far East,” *Science* 52 (Dec., 1920): 568-569.

providing an occult explanation for contemporary science rather than creating a completely novel proposition.

At the same time, by accepting the premise that the American Indians were most closely related to the Mongolians, she was subtly disassociating the Native Americans from the Asian cultures that she had identified as belonging to the Aryan root race. The theory that both Mongolians and Native Americans were the descendents of the lost continent of Atlantis adequately incorporated contemporary scientific thought about the Asiatic origins of American Indians, without jeopardizing Blavatsky's concomitant assertion that the other peoples of Asia belonged to an entirely different root race.

Native Americans as Remnants of the Fourth Root Race

Writers advocated widely divergent perspectives about the significance of the concept of root races in Theosophical literature over the next several decades, arguing that people belonging to earlier root races were superior to the modern West in some respects and inferior in others. Many implied both positions at once, and most, especially when addressing Native American cultures, simply repeated platitudes about authentic and ancient spirituality that were superficially laudatory, but potentially demeaning.

In this respect, Theosophists were not far removed from American culture as a whole, and their ideas about Native Americans generally paralleled those of the wider populace. Annie Besant, writing in the early twentieth century, represented the view popular around the turn of the century that American Indians exemplified bravery and nobility, but were morally degenerate, unsanitary, and thus in need of civilizing

acculturation.⁸⁹ Besant explained their alleged prowess on the battlefield by noting that the remnants of the Atlantean fourth root race, since they were less developed in the physical realm than the Aryan fifth root race, were less sensitive to pain and thus able to “undergo, with very partial disablement, lacerations that would utterly prostrate a fifth Race man.” She continued, “A North American Indian has been reported on fighting on after the side of the thigh had been slashed away... this characteristic of the fourth Race body enables a savage to bear with composure, and to recover from, tortures that would prostrate a fifth Race man from nervous shock.”⁹⁰

If Besant’s facile and stereotypical explanation of Native Americans’ stoic insensitivity to pain could be interpreted by her contemporaries as commendatory, her full perspective on the differences between root races was clearly in debt to the racist formulations advanced by cultural evolutionists. She argued, contrary to her previous assertion, as well as to Blavatsky’s formulation, that the fourth race was, in some respects, more physically and less spiritually advanced than the fifth. As she wrote,

The sense-organs of the fifth Race body... do not respond to vibrations which would affect the fourth Race sense-organs... On the other hand, while less acute in receiving pure sense-impacts, [members of the fifth root race] become more sensitive to sensations intermingled with emotions, and delicacies of color and of sound, whether of nature or of art, appeal to them more effectively. The higher and more intricate organization of the sense-centers in the brain and in the astral body seems to bring about increased sensitiveness to beauty of color, form, and sound, but diminished response to the sensations in which the emotions play no part.⁹¹

⁸⁹ See Berkhofer, 144.

⁹⁰ Annie Besant, *A Study in Consciousness* (Los Angeles: Theosophical Publishing House, 1918), 109-110.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 111-112.

Using the strategy of reversing typical Theosophical thought and positing the fifth root race as more emotionally or spiritually attuned than the fourth, at least in regard to aesthetics, Besant was able to discount the significance of Native American and other indigenous cultural practices, and promote the spread of Western cultural values, instead. Her discussion of the Native Americans' insufficiency in appreciating "sensations intermingled with emotions" mirrored her political program in India of proscribing indigenous traditions that she considered immoral.⁹²

Perhaps even more startling is Besant's explanation for degeneracy among cultures belonging to the fifth root race as an unfortunate but necessary side-effect of colonialism. Many souls still needed experience on the lower evolutionary levels before they could advance further, she argued, and the stress put on the remaining third and fourth root race cultures was so great that they were necessarily being incarnated among the members of the fifth root race. In her description, "the suitable savage conditions are becoming rarer and rarer, under the ever-expanding flood of higher races, and they have to take birth under the lowest available conditions, such as the slums of large cities, in families of criminal types."⁹³ Recognition of such individuals' lower evolutionary state, she wrote, in a remarkably ironic argument for progressive social reform, could result in more humane treatment of criminals and indigents, allowing them to progress more quickly toward incarnation in the next root race.

It is important to remember that as ethnocentric and derogatory as Besant's writing was, she was a comparatively liberal proponent of racial equality and anti-

⁹² See Mortimer, esp. 64.

⁹³ Annie Besant, *A Study in Consciousness*, 113.

colonialism, as evinced by her work with the Indian National Congress. Other contemporary advocates of cultural evolutionary theory, both from scientific and religious standpoints, used the concept to argue against such issues as Native American voting rights and self-government within reservations on the grounds that American Indians had not “evolved” to a level that would make them competent to operate within the modern world.⁹⁴ Others promoted government-run boarding schools where students were required to adopt Western standards of dress and appearance, and where native languages were forbidden, in an attempt to hasten the Indians’ progression toward what were considered acceptable standards of civilization.⁹⁵

Beginning around 1915, however, Theosophists began to reinterpret the significance of the Native Americans’ supposed state as among the last remaining members of the fourth root race. Writers diverged dramatically from Besant’s racist formulations and reinterpreted this status to suggest that the American Indians maintained ancient religious knowledge with the potential to radically advance the spiritual state of the cultures of the West. This new approach mirrored changing attitudes toward Native Americans in a broader spectrum of American culture; on the scientific front, anthropologists had begun to adopt Boas’ cultural relativism as an alternative to earlier formulations of cultural evolution, arguing that history, rather than

⁹⁴ Wenger, *We Have a Religion*, 35-36.

⁹⁵ See Julie Davis, “American Indian Boarding School Experiences: Recent Studies from Native Perspectives,” *Organization of American Historians Magazine of History* 15, no. 2 (Winter, 2001): 20-22. As Davis notes, however, earlier scholars failed to note the diverse ways in which Native Americans at boarding schools found ways to perpetuate aspects of traditional culture despite the oppressive environment, and that the schools “embodied both victimization and agency for Native people, and they served as sites of both cultural loss and cultural persistence.”

ineluctable evolutionary forces, determines the specifics of individual expressions of culture.⁹⁶

The same time period marked a broad shift in cultural and political attitudes toward Native Americans. Alan Trachtenberg has described the period surrounding the turn of the twentieth century as the “turn toward the ‘good’ Indian.”⁹⁷ No longer a threat to manifest destiny, American Indians began to exemplify honor, rather than savagery, in the popular imagination. During this period, people dissatisfied with various aspects of modernity began to look to Native Americans, along with other cultures around the world, as exemplifying a more natural, healthful existence. As Sherry L. Smith wrote, “the antimodernists’ quest for models of the simple life, the strenuous life, or the life of religious and spiritual meaning could take a Northeastern bourgeois across the Atlantic Ocean—or across the Mississippi river.”⁹⁸ As Smith acknowledges, however, most of those who became interested in Native American cultures never actually journeyed west, but relied on literary and artistic models to understand Indian cultures. Numerous writers, activists, artists, and cultural critics in the first decades of the twentieth century sought to overturn conventional depictions of American Indians and promote a newly positive, if equally stereotyped image. As Adam Kuper asserted, “primitive society inverts some strategically significant features

⁹⁶ Jonaitis, esp. 4-9.

⁹⁷ Alan Trachtenberg, *Shades of Hiawatha: Staging Indians, Making Americans, 1880-1930* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), xxiii.

⁹⁸ Smith, 8-9.

that are attributed to modern society... both terms of the opposition are equally imaginary, but they sustain each other.”⁹⁹

The emerging discourse that celebrated rather than repudiated the “otherness” of Native Americans for their presumed closeness to nature was, as Robert Berkhofer argued, equally dependent on fictive constructions of “Indian-ness” as were the earlier conceptions advocating paternalistic assimilation. This new image was promoted by those who, according to Berkhofer, “portrayed Indian cultures as manifesting the wholeness of man, the humanity of interpersonal relationships, and the integrity of organic unity,” but who “had abandoned the liberalism of the mid-nineteenth century for the liberalism of the mid-twentieth as their way of judging the presumably splintered culture of their own industrial society.”¹⁰⁰ The resulting image was, if superficially positive, nonetheless artificial, imposed, and, frequently, unwanted. In discussing “Indian wisdom,” writers generally ignored the actual beliefs, arts, literatures, and historical accomplishments of the diverse indigenous peoples of North America, and instead created a generalized fictive being who exemplified the opposite of the modern neurasthenic.¹⁰¹

Some contemporary authors were explicit about the need to refashion Western mores after these idealized and imaginary Indians. Ernest Thompson Seton, for example, organized the Woodcraft Indians, a young men’s organization that brought together contemporary ideals of the “strenuous life” through outdoor exercise, late

⁹⁹ Kuper, 223.

¹⁰⁰ Berkhofer, 67.

¹⁰¹ See T. J. Jackson Lears’ description of neurasthenia as an illness indicative of antimodern dissatisfaction with Western society in *No Place of Grace*, 47-58.

Victorian chivalry, and masculine bravery in its creation of the generic exemplary Indian, the “Noble Red Male.”¹⁰² Seton argued that his program would help raise boys with physical and mental vigor, and combat juvenile crime caused by the enervating atmosphere of the modern city. Seton wrote in the *Gospel of the Red Man*, “The civilization of the White man is a failure; it is visibly crumbling around us,” whereas the Indians were “representative of the most heroic race the world has ever seen, the most physically perfect race the world has ever seen, the most spiritual civilization the world has ever seen.”¹⁰³

Seton couched his argument in specifically religious terms, offering the alleged “Indian” way of life as a gospel to convert America away from debilitating materialism. As did most of his contemporaries who lauded Native American religion, Seton represented the liberal end of the religious spectrum in the United States, advocating a highly combinative and unstructured religion that focused on personal conscious in determining the best mode for an individual’s own worship. And, concomitantly, he asserted that the Indians themselves espoused essentially the same attitude toward religion. Borrowing concepts from American Transcendentalism as well as later Free Thought, Seton wrote that “The idea of one Great Oversoul is widely spread among the Indians,” and that the Indians know that “the soul of man is immortal. Whence it came into this world or whither it goes when it departs, we do not know, and have no means of

¹⁰² H. Allen Anderson, *The Chief: Ernest Thompson Seton and the Changing West* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1986), 129-130. Seton was also instrumental in founding the Boy Scouts of America, and originated much of that organization’s focus on Native American cultures, as well.

¹⁰³ Ernest Thompson Seton and Julia M. Seton, *The Gospel of the Red Man: An Indian Bible* (New York: Doubleday and Doran, 1936).

ascertaining.”¹⁰⁴ Seton was apparently ignorant of the dramatic diversity of beliefs among Native Americans on these subjects, and used a generalized and poorly grounded conception of American Indian “religion” to justify his own views.

Seton aligned himself with numerous other contemporary writers, especially Theosophists, by positing Indian belief as illustrating the central tenets of a “universal” religion. He claimed that among those who “held to a creed which was exactly that of the Red Man” were Abraham, Socrates, Voltaire, Lincoln, Whitman, and even Ingersoll.¹⁰⁵ Similarly, his wife, Julia M. Seton, wrote in the foreword to *The Gospel of the Red Man* that she had given the manuscript to a rabbi, who said it was “straight Judaism,” and found similar responses of unexpected recognition among Presbyterians, Greek Orthodox, Quakers, Mormons, and Masons. “So it would seem that it must be real religion,” she wrote, “since it is universal, basic and fundamental.” She took this apparent universal acceptance to evince the potential of their conception of Indian religion to initiate worldwide spiritual regeneration; “As a corollary, then, it must be acceptable to a world seeking a way out of dogma into truth.”¹⁰⁶

Charles Alexander Eastman, an associate of Seton’s and co-founder of the Boy Scouts of America, published a similarly themed book, *The Soul of the Indian*, in 1911, but with an added sense of authority that came from Eastman’s status as an Indian himself. Part Sioux, Eastman was an active proponent of Indian rights, and used his conception of Indian religion to argue for the protection of traditional Native American

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 3-5.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 4.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., v.

cultures.¹⁰⁷ Eastman advanced a theory of universal correspondence of religions similar to Seton's, arguing that Christianity in its original state was essentially what the Sioux believe; he wrote, "I believe that Christianity and modern civilization are opposed and irreconcilable, and that the spirit of Christianity and of our ancient religion is essentially the same."¹⁰⁸

Neither Seton nor Eastman was a member of the Theosophical Society, but their discussion of "universal" religion was appropriated by Theosophists to explain the significance of Native American religions. The *Theosophic Messenger*, for example, reprinted an entire chapter of *The Soul of the Indian* in its 1911 issue; its appeal is obvious, as Eastman portrayed American Indians as espousing beliefs that are markedly similar to points of Theosophical doctrine. First, his assertion of the fundamental unity of all religions in their original state closely corresponds to the Theosophists' belief in a single truth underlying the world's belief systems. Second, he claimed that the Indians did not worship an anthropomorphic god, but rather the "Eternal, the 'Great Mystery' that surrounds and embraces us," in agreement with Blavatsky's description of God not as a person, but as the "Eternal Cause."¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, Eastman professed that many Native Americans believe in reincarnation, noting that "there were some who claimed to have full knowledge of a former incarnation."¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ See Janine Pease Pretty On Top, introduction to *Light on the Indian World: the Essential Writings of Charles Eastman*, ed. Michael O. Fitzgerald (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2002), xv-xxii.

¹⁰⁸ Charles Alexander Eastman, *The Soul of the Indian* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911), 24.

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in *The Theosophic Messenger* 21 (1911): 567; Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine* 1:391.

¹¹⁰ Quoted in *The Theosophic Messenger*, 21 (1911): 576.

Lastly, and perhaps most tellingly, the editors of the *Theosophic Messenger* chose to excerpt the chapter in which Eastman discussed the “occult powers” of the Indians, “remarkable prophecies and other mystic practices,” including powers of premonition, spirit communication, and telepathy, which he suggested were a result of their unrivaled understanding of natural forces. These ideas resonated strongly with Theosophists, as the American Indians, the supposed remnants of the Atlantean root race, were likewise portrayed in metaphysical literature as maintaining psychic powers that were well developed in the fourth root race but subsequently lost to the preponderance of humanity. According to Besant, it was the open teaching of sciences that should have remained occult that led to the destruction of Atlantis, as “men became giants in knowledge but also giants in evil,” leading directly to their downfall.¹¹¹

Theosophical and other metaphysical religious concepts about Native American cultures were not limited to arcane discussions among occult enthusiasts, but had a marked and lasting influence on contemporary public policy. Among the most active proponents of Indian rights in the early twentieth century was John Collier, a social activist in New York City whom Mabel Dodge Luhan had convinced to come to New Mexico and work on behalf of the Pueblo Indians. Luhan summoned Collier to help her promote, in her words, a “new world plan” based on the Indians’ way of life, conceived of in explicitly religious terms.¹¹² Luhan understood the Pueblo people through her background in metaphysical religion, and accepted many of the Theosophical tenets regarding the Indian’s authentic and surpassing spirituality that came by virtue of the

¹¹¹ Annie Besant, *Esoteric Christianity* (Adyar, India: Theosophical Publishing House, 1966), 12-13.

¹¹² Quoted in Flannery Burke, *From Greenwich Village to Taos: Primitivism and Place at Mabel Dodge Luhan’s* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 53.

antiquity of their culture. She saw “Indian religion” as the positive antipole of religion in the West; whereas, in her view, sectarian Christianity had become oppressive, external, and devoid of substance, she promoted the Pueblos’ beliefs as natural, integral, and empowering. “Their religion,” she wrote, “all of love & joy & the sun & growing things fills them constantly, *daily*, with wonder & worshipful delight.”¹¹³

She envisioned a future in which American Indian culture, enlivened by the supposed freedom of a “natural” life, revived a stagnating and morally vapid world; she saw “a huge wheel turning slowly, weighted down with all the accretions of our civilization... on the other side of the wheel, rising bare limbed and free, heads up bound with green leaves, sheaves of corn and wheat across their shoulders, this dark race mounting.”¹¹⁴ In Luhan’s estimation, the Pueblos’ beliefs could, along with metaphysical religions, fill a cultural vacuum in the West that scientific materialism had opened. As she wrote, “It has always been true that the hermetic religions preserved the life-forces of the people. In our own environment we know we are losing certain values through the violations of our incorrigible and over-curious scientists and we are not learning anything more valuable to take the place of what we lose.”¹¹⁵ The Taos Indians were exemplary, she felt, in showing that knowledge outside the context of a wider system of belief was not true wisdom; hope for the future lay, to use Blavatsky’s phrase, in the “synthesis of science, religion, and philosophy.”¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Quoted in Burke, 108.

¹¹⁴ Mabel Dodge Luhan, *The Edge of Taos Desert: an Escape to Reality* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 197.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 280.

¹¹⁶ From Blavatsky’s subtitle to *The Secret Doctrine*.

She also followed contemporary Theosophists in presuming the ability and knowledge to interpret Indian religion better than the Indians themselves. Rather than giving them a platform to present their own beliefs, she assumed their voice and promoted a mix of metaphysical religious and Pueblo ideas, often already drawn from second-hand sources, as authentic “native” religion. Flannery Burke has criticized Mabel Dodge Luhan’s nearly complete control over her Taos Pueblo husband’s expression; Tony Lujan speaks in the historical record only through Mabel’s stereotyped Indian voice, repeating her conceptions of Indian belief with unfailing assent. On one occasion, she used his supposed agreement with a lecture by Jean Toomer on the teachings of Gurdjieff to testify to the universal and ancient veracity of metaphysical religion.¹¹⁷ In fact, as Tisa Wenger described, Mabel Dodge Luhan’s relationship with Tony did not grant her access to the private ceremonies at Taos, and he respected the tribal laws that prevented him from revealing any knowledge considered secret. Despite the pretense of intimate knowledge of Pueblo belief that pervades her writing, Mabel Dodge Luhan’s participation in Pueblo culture was limited to attendance at the public ceremonies.¹¹⁸

John Collier came to Taos on Luhan’s invitation, and she succeeded in turning his interest in social activism toward the New Mexico Indians.¹¹⁹ Beginning in 1922, Collier helped organize opposition to the so-called Bursum bill, which would have legally recognized non-Indian title to significant portions of Pueblo land. His continued

¹¹⁷ Burke, 101.

¹¹⁸ Tisa Wenger, *We Have a Religion*, 86.

¹¹⁹ See Tisa Wenger, “Modernists, Pueblo Indians, and the Politics of Primitivism,” in *Race, Religion, Region: Landscapes of Encounter in the American West*, ed. Fay Botham and Sara M. Patterson (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2006): 101-110.

political involvement in progressive Indian rights issues led to his selection as commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1933 by Franklin Roosevelt. Collier's appointment has been viewed as a watershed moment in American Indian history, as it marked a radical reversal, initiating an era of substantial reform toward increased Native American self governance and the end of the official assimilation policy.¹²⁰

Among Collier's most radical proposals, and one that owes a great deal to his affiliation with Mabel Dodge Luhan and the metaphysics that she promoted, was the idea that American Indians had more to teach the "white man" than the other way around. As he wrote, the Indians "had what the world has lost. They have it now. What the world has lost, the world must have again, lest it die."¹²¹ He argued that Indians' "profound values of comparative religion" were of inestimable value to the contemporary Western world, echoing Luhan's Theosophically derived understanding of the Native Americans' possession of the core of a universal religion.¹²² Collier used overt references to metaphysical religion in several texts; he wrote that Native Americans addressed their worship to "the Spirit—the tribe's, nature's and God's, which the Indian always conceived of as a blend; to the cosmic Mana."¹²³ He also referenced the idea that the Native Americans were remnants of the fourth root race,

¹²⁰ See Elmer R. Rusco, *A Fateful Time: The Background and Legislative History of the Indian Reorganization Act* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2000), esp. 23-27, 137-145.

¹²¹ John Collier, *Indians of the Americas* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1947), 7.

¹²² Quoted in E. A. Schwartz, "Red Atlantis Revisited: Community and Culture in the Writings of John Collier," *American Indian Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (Autumn, 1994): 517. Little scholarship has addressed Collier's work in the context of metaphysical religion—Collier acknowledged that he began his career of social activism as a result of a mystical experience as a young man, in which he had a vision of a bird speaking to him, telling him of his role in the "immortal effort toward creation." See Kenneth R. Philp, *John Collier's Crusade for Indian Reform, 1920-1954* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1977), 6.

¹²³ John Collier, "Amerindians," *Pacific Cultural Affairs* 2, no. 3 (Mar., 1929): 120.

titling a 1922 article about the ancient wisdom preserved by the Pueblos, “The Red Atlantis.”¹²⁴

As Wenger has explicated, Collier, Luhan, and other modernists in New Mexico entered into a debate about Pueblo religion that had been ongoing since the arrival of the Spanish in the sixteenth century. The Pueblo people had ensured the survival of their traditional culture by defining aspects of their ceremonialism as “custom” as opposed “religion” in order to elicit the tolerance of the Catholic colonial authorities. In the early twentieth century, they reframed their strategy to argue for the constitutional right of their cultural expression by representing it as a religion, deserving of the same protection as any other. Wenger showed how the Pueblo cannily navigated diverse political climates over centuries of colonization, exploiting the changing semantics of cultural discourse throughout Spanish, Mexican, and American administration.¹²⁵ In Wenger’s view, the modernists, despite their ethnocentric presumptions and propensity to severely misconstrue Pueblo belief, were ultimately instrumental in bringing progressive changes to public policy. “In the long run,” she wrote, “modernists and Pueblo leaders would develop the primitivist celebration of Indian ‘religion’ into a political argument for religious freedom, land rights, and tribal sovereignty... [opening] cultural spaces for the emergence of Indian voices into public debate and for the critiques of primitivism that followed.”¹²⁶

¹²⁴ John Collier, “The Red Atlantis,” *The Survey* 49, no. 1 (Oct., 1922): 15-20, 63.

¹²⁵ Wenger, *We Have a Religion*.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

Another effect of the political promotion of “Indian religion” during the 1920s and 1930s was a tremendous increase in the interest of esoteric religious groups in the subject, partly owing to the overt metaphysical language that New Mexico modernists employed. While occult perspectives on Indians had, to varying degrees, attracted Luhan, Austin, Collier, and others to the Southwest, the publicity that they focused on the region helped instigate a tremendous upsurge in metaphysical literature about Native American cultures. The change was so dramatic that even Theosophists in India began studying the Indians of America.¹²⁷ By the mid-twentieth century, studies of Native American beliefs began to eclipse discussions of Asian religion both in volume and in prominence in metaphysical literature.¹²⁸

This was the context in which Agnes Pelton encountered the Indians of the Southwest. She maintained personal relationships with many of the key figures involved in this discourse, including Luhan and Austin, and she read numerous religious texts that explicitly addressed these themes. Several of her close associates wrote extensively about American Indians; I discuss Nicholas Roerich and Dane Rudhyar’s metaphysical interpretations of Native American cultures in chapter three. Will Levington Comfort published a book titled *Apache* in 1931, the year that Pelton visited the Glass Hive in Pasadena. In it, he portrayed the Southwestern Indians as culturally, physically, and spiritually superior to the Europeans and Anglo-Americans with whom they came in contact. As she expressed through her art her own conception of the

¹²⁷ *The Theosophist*, published in Madras, India, has included numerous articles that reference Native American beliefs; see, for example, “Theosophical Work Around the World,” *The Theosophist* 114 (1992): 352.

¹²⁸ See Jenkins, 135-138.

importance of American Indian religions in the anticipated synthesis of ancient wisdom, she drew on many of these sources.

Pelton was also exposed to a number of related conceptions through her study of art, beginning well before her first visit to the Southwest. Arthur Wesley Dow used Native American pottery and textile designs, along with examples from Japanese art, to illustrate his concept of *notan*. At the summer school in Ipswich where Pelton served as his teaching assistant, Dow's students made pottery, woven textiles, and baskets, using ostensibly traditional Native American techniques, as pictured in a photograph of his class from the Ipswich Historical Society (Fig. 6).¹²⁹ Dow emphasized the importance of learning authentic indigenous methods of production, according to a contemporary journalist, in order to bring the students "to the primitive beginnings of an art," so that they might learn, "by following the primal instincts for art, to develop [their] work according to natural indications."¹³⁰ This allowed the students to start with the art of the "childhood of the race" and build on that foundation as they advanced toward their own innovations. Dow promoted this method over the more typical emphasis on Classical and Renaissance art, which he felt instilled too many stylistic presuppositions to allow students to develop genuine creativity.¹³¹

The use of allegedly authentic American Indian techniques also emphasized the Native artists' continual reliance on nature. "Primitive man," as Dow wrote, "takes the things that are found around his hut... books that lied at hand, always open and ready to

¹²⁹ Elizabeth Hutchinson, *The Indian Craze: Primitivism, Modernism, and Transculturation in American Art, 1890-1915* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 110-111.

¹³⁰ Sylvester Baxter, "Handicraft, and its Extension at Ipswich," *Handicraft* 1, no. 11 (Feb., 1903): 253.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 253.

be read, are the ones from which we may best learn our lessons.”¹³² Dow helped his students find local materials with which to produce their ersatz Indian pots, baskets, and rugs, accentuating the natural basis he asserted for Native American art. More than just a matter of utility, the connection between art and nature that Dow taught was also charged with religious significance. As I describe above, Dow argued in *Composition* that the “contemplation of the powers and existences of external nature, with a spiritual interpretation of them,” allowed Japanese artists to apprehend visual reality in a manner that expressed genuine “intuition and religious emotion,” rather than mere observation. Relying on the widespread contemporary conception of the Native Americans’ unparalleled closeness to nature, Dow believed that their art practice was comparable to that of Buddhist monks’.¹³³

While Dow admired certain formal aspects of Native American art and lauded the Native artists’ perceived spiritual connection to nature, he also understood their work as conveying important symbolism. In 1915, his students submitted sixty designs to the Panama-Pacific Exposition which were based on “Indian symbols,” including ancient Southwestern petroglyphs, hieroglyphs from the Yucatan, and modern Zuni decorative motifs.¹³⁴ Dow intended the project to “promote a new national style” based on indigenous American art, in alliance with a range of artists and critics who advocated American Indian art as the most authentic indigenous national art.¹³⁵ Dow avoided

¹³² Ibid, 254.

¹³³ See chapter four for a detailed discussion of the contemporary conception of American Indians as living in intimate harmony with nature.

¹³⁴ Moffat, 123.

¹³⁵ See Wanda Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999: 245-291, for an account of modernists’ attempts to

interpreting these symbols, but celebrated them as “mysterious and elemental motifs.”¹³⁶ To Dow, their significance was not in their specific meanings, but in their collective importance as the basic visual blocks of a universal symbolic language; though Dow knew, as Frederick Moffatt wrote, that its “exact meaning would forever remain just beyond reach,” he chose to have a swastika inscribed on the boulder that was to mark his grave.¹³⁷ Its presence in American Indian, Asian, and ancient Greek art demonstrated its alleged universal, if obscure, significance, but the fact of its apparent cross-cultural symbolic function was meaning enough for Dow.

Dow conceived of Native American art as significant in three distinct ways: in his belief, it demonstrated genuine creativity in opposition to ossified Western conventions; it evinced the codependence of art, nature, and religion; and it provided elements of a supposed universal symbolic language. Dow was the first to introduce these themes to Pelton’s work, but her continuing study of art only further instilled their importance in her developing aesthetic.

Simultaneously, Pelton sought an aesthetic model that would allow her painting to fully express the religious sentiment that she intended. In formulating an art that would function as a vehicle of spiritual enrichment, she continued to reference the conceptions of Native American cultures that were central to her understanding of the evolutionary progression of humanity. Although her allusions to the American Indians were often inconspicuous elements of her abstracted symbolic compositions, they

fashion the Native Americans of the Southwest as the most authentic American artists by virtue of their ancient connection to the American land itself. See also, Marsden Hartley, ““Red Man Ceremonials: an American Plea for American Esthetics,” *Art and Archeology* 9, no. 31 (Jan., 1920): 7-14.

¹³⁶ Moffat, 123.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

nonetheless constituted a significant, if largely unrecognized theme throughout her late career.

Pelton's Religious Aesthetic

By the time that Pelton began associating with Bisttram and Jonson, she had theorized an ideal aesthetic for religious art, which she strove to express in her abstract paintings. Though she was reticent about discussing the religious character of her work, she wrote at length on this subject in response to Dane Rudhyar's request for information to include in his planned book on the Transcendental Painting Group. The letter, preserved in the Raymond Jonson Archives, encapsulated Pelton's understanding of how her art functioned as a vehicle for religious expression.¹³⁸ For Pelton, the experience of creating and viewing art was central to its spiritual function. In her view, the work of art was not a physical repository of meaning so much as a nexus through which diverse interpretations brought by the artist and the viewer could converge in a rich polyvalent field. Pelton intended her paintings to produce a mental or emotional state in the viewer similar to the one she had experienced while painting; she described her aim as to "give life and vitality to the visual images which have come to me from time to time as fleeting but meaningful experiences—to sound their harmonies through the painter's hand and express their potencies that others may see and hear."¹³⁹

Pelton's theory of reception was clearly indebted to Kandinsky, whose work she acknowledged as an important source.¹⁴⁰ Kandinsky used the term "harmony" in a

¹³⁸ Pelton to Rudhyar, 22 Aug., 1938, Raymond Jonson Archives.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Pelton, "Abstract Paintings: Personal Statement," no date, Raymond Jonson Archives.

similar sense, asserting that the “harmony of the new art” could convey the “inner life,” or “something that appeals less to the eye and more to the soul.”¹⁴¹ An abstract work, Kandinsky believed, could ideally create a “super-sensuous” emotion in the viewer, exercising a “direct impression on the soul.”¹⁴² Drawing on Kandinsky’s theory, Pelton held that art with no recognizable subject matter could be richly meaningful. She interpreted Kandinsky to argue that meaning conveyed through the direct emanation of emotion had potentially vast religious significance.

Pelton meant to do more than just elicit a particular mental state or emotional response through her art—she trusted the “inner realm” from which she felt her paintings arose as a fount of spiritual knowledge more immediate than any outside source.¹⁴³ The inner visions that she sought to portray were not intended to be *descriptive*, but *prescriptive*: instead of illustrating religious concepts or conveying specific meanings through particular symbols, she meant her work to allow others, through the act of viewing, to access their own internal sight, awaken their own spiritual perception. As she wrote, “though art lends itself willingly to illustration of mental concepts... [it] can contribute to the apprehension of spiritual life, and the expansion of a deeper vision.”¹⁴⁴

Theosophists held that the kind of truth that was learned through personal reflection in this manner was superior to any other, as it was not absorbed from the

¹⁴¹ Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. Michael T. H. Sadler (London: Tate Publishing, 2006), 37, 103. See chapter three for a more extensive discussion of Kandinsky’s work in relation to Emil Bistram’s aesthetic theory.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁴³ Pelton to Rudhyar, 22 Aug., 1938, Raymond Jonson Archives.

¹⁴⁴ Pelton, 12 June, 1957, “To Introduce my Oil Painting, *Illumination*,” Raymond Jonson Archives.

teachings of others, but directly apprehended through access to the universal wisdom pervading the cosmos. As Blavatsky wrote, intuition was, potentially, the most trusted source of knowledge, as inner understanding came through connection with the “universal mind,” not the will of an embodied deity, but the “universal divine principle” to which every object and every force in the world were inextricably connected.¹⁴⁵ Besant asserted that Theosophy gave artists a means of approaching this universal mind; as she wrote, Theosophy “opens up to art the superphysical,” and “in showing the artist the possibilities of his inner nature, gives him a new power...”¹⁴⁶

This concept was also related to the work of Carl Jung, who, beginning around 1910, proposed a “collective unconscious” as the source of archetypal imagery that pervades the subconscious mind of every human. Jung wrote that “this collective unconscious does not develop individually but is inherited,” and imperceptibly informs the conscious mind.¹⁴⁷ As Hammer described, Jung’s work was immediately hailed by metaphysical writers as giving a scientific basis to their conception of the universal principle that connected all humanity; his theory of the collective unconscious was discussed at length throughout Theosophical literature.¹⁴⁸ Jung’s writing did not provide Pelton with specific archetypal images, but strengthened her understanding that every individual was intimately connected with a “universal mind,” and suggested that images with no evident symbolism might have significant subconscious meaning.

¹⁴⁵ Blavatsky, *Key to Theosophy*, 107, 148.

¹⁴⁶ Annie Besant, *Buddhist Popular Lectures Delivered in Ceylon in 1907* (Adyar, India: Theosophical Publishing Society), 1908.

¹⁴⁷ Carl Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, ed. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 43.

¹⁴⁸ Hammer, 68-70.

On the surface, Pelton's aesthetic resembles Surrealist painters' attempt to access meaning on subconscious levels; numerous Surrealists in Europe and in the United States had cited Jung's work as justifying their approach.¹⁴⁹ The artists of the Transcendental Painting Group, however, maintained that their work diverged markedly from Surrealism by treating the subconscious not as the ultimate source of archetypal images, but as a portal to a numinous realm of order and meaning.¹⁵⁰ Morang characterized Surrealism, by contrast, as unearthing a chaotic jumble of empty symbols; he claimed that "Surrealism and related movements" had joined the "forces of cultural disintegration" by treating images with underlying religious significance as meaningless products of the subconscious mind.¹⁵¹

Pelton, emphasizing the religious nature of her project, saw her work as revelatory, but arising through inspiration from the universe rather than from God. Pelton's work, Rudhyar claimed, could "only come from one inwardly integrated," as it was accessible solely to those who could connect with the universal mind underlying their own consciousness.¹⁵² Pelton's studio practice reflected the conviction that truly religious art could only come from inner sources; as I described above, she constructed a "meditation room" in which she attempted to access the "Inner Temple," using

¹⁴⁹ See Celia Rabinovitch, *Surrealism and the Sacred: Power, Eros, and the Occult in Modern Art* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2002), 47-52. Pelton was certainly exposed to Surrealism at the Armory Show, if not earlier; see Jeffrey Wechsler and Jack J. Spector, *Surrealism and American Art, 1931-1947* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1977), 28.

¹⁵⁰ See Rudhyar's description of Surrealism in *The Transcendental Movement in Painting*, 42. Contrary to his claims, as Rabinovitch has demonstrated, Surrealist painters approached many of the same religious discourses that the Transcendental Painting Group artists did, including Theosophy. See *Surrealism and the Sacred*, xvii, 103.

¹⁵¹ Morang, "The Transcendental Painting Group: its Origins, Foundation, Ideals, and Works."

¹⁵² Quoted in Jimmy Gartner, "Rudhyar Discusses Transcendentalism," *New Mexico Daily Examiner*, 25 Aug., 1938.

Comfort's term, and expand her vision beyond the bounds of physical experience.¹⁵³

Pelton described her work in terms that seem almost biblical: "These paintings are seldom presentations of forms in Nature—except in a symbolic sense; they are impressions of inner visual experiences, bringing light out of darkness—serenity out of oppression..."¹⁵⁴ The most profound art, in Pelton's estimation, was not didactic, symbolic, or illustrative, but had the potential to convey "universal" spiritual knowledge by eliciting the viewer to contemplation, spurring the same communion with the indwelling "universal" forces which had produced the paintings themselves.

Pelton described her art as being transportive. She intended her paintings to interrupt the viewer's regular perception of the world so dramatically that the encounter seemed like a physical disjuncture. She meant her art to evoke the sensation of beginning a journey: "somewhat as one enters a train or some station, the arrival at another place takes shape in the mind..."¹⁵⁵ In her view, her paintings were not physical vehicles to other states, but acted as portals allowing the mind access to locations that the body had not yet experienced, just as one could envision an ultimate destination while stepping onto a train that was still in the territory of ordinary experience. Pelton continued, "But though we have not left the material world as in entering a train we have left the station, and our visioning mind is open to the fleeting sight on the way and our becoming destination."¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ Pelton to Jane Levington Comfort, 26 Nov., 1944. Letters from Agnes Pelton to Jane Levington Comfort (Jane Annixter) 1934-1959, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹⁵⁴ Pelton, "Abstract Paintings: Personal Statement."

¹⁵⁵ Pelton, "Statement for Agnes Pelton Paintings," 22 Aug., 1938, Raymond Jonson Archives.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

Pelton felt that representational art too directly influenced the viewer toward a particular perception. She criticized the standardized didacticism of “conservative” religious art, “destined for churches or shrines,” as “a definite end in itself”; such art, in her view, had a fixed, limited meaning. Her aim was to create art that allowed unique spiritual perceptions upon each act of viewing.¹⁵⁷ As Rudhyar described, “Each one of her transcendental paintings is a revelation of a phase of her inner spiritual being. Each is a living symbol of transcendental realities. Yet no one needs, in order to understand these works, to be versed in unusual lore. For they talk directly to the soul of sensitive persons in the eternal and universal language of form and color...”¹⁵⁸ In his view, Pelton’s paintings rose above the realm of overtly symbolic religious art because they did not require the knowledge of a particular iconography, and, as “living symbols,” they had no set interpretation, but could convey unique significance to each individual viewer.

Though Pelton argued for an aesthetic that transcended the limitations of representation, she hesitated to call her work abstract. She felt that the term implied an art divorced not only from figuration but from meaning. She asserted that the modern artists’ “urge to surmount materialism,” while a laudable goal, had “driven them away from emotional reactions,” resulting in a sterile art that was concerned only with aesthetics, and had no ultimate spiritual function or significance.¹⁵⁹ To distinguish her

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Rudhyar, *A New Growth Proves the Fertility of the Southwest*.

¹⁵⁹ Pelton, “Statement for Agnes Pelton Paintings.”

own work from such art, she described it as “visual interpretations of the realities of life, not abstractions.”¹⁶⁰

In this respect, she echoed numerous critics who wrote about art from the standpoint of metaphysical religions. Comfort likely influenced her conception that pure abstraction precluded the possibility of conveying the “realities of life.” He argued against the creed of “art for art’s sake,” asserting that “art has ceased to parallel reality,” and that the various modernisms evinced a “tragic turning to art as aim.”¹⁶¹ Comfort did not insist that all art conform to traditional representational modes, but believed that art without meaning was nothing more than decoration. True beauty, he wrote, arose from the stimulation of “higher faculties” in the mind, through appeal to the universal principles connecting every aspect of past, present, and future reality. In Comfort’s view, true artistic genius came from access to this universal consciousness: “All creative thought is spiritually energized. The mind with its inimitable hosts of experience momentarily vibrates to such a pitch that it strikes contact with a spiritual revelation.”¹⁶²

Pelton wrote that the artist was ultimately an “instrument” who created a physical repository for preexisting meaning, not the original creator of meaning: “We must provide the means,” she wrote, “but the message shapes the tool and the material.”¹⁶³ Metaphysical writers used “instrument” as a term referring to individuals who brought messages of enlightenment from the universal realm to the physical plane.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Comfort, *Midstream*, 203.

¹⁶² Ibid., 313.

¹⁶³ Pelton, “Statement for Agnes Pelton Paintings.”

Charlotte Woods wrote in the *Theosophical Review*, for example, that one should aspire to the “personal condition as an instrument... [a] vehicle of the spiritual.”¹⁶⁴ This fit well with Pelton’s conception of the artist as conveying knowledge from the universal consciousness. As she wrote describing her creative process:

The doors of the mind are not opened outward to anything that comes along—but at certain moments something flies in—a homing pigeon perhaps—with a message which is our business to interpret to the best of our ability with the means at hand... Work—revelation. We need the work of instruments imbued with love.¹⁶⁵

For Pelton, artists became instruments of revelation when they allowed their minds to receive messages from the universal consciousness. The work of art was revelation, and it was the artist’s responsibility to bring the message of love that would help usher in an era of peace and understanding. Comfort expressed a similar conception of the role of the artist, writing that “we refine to higher and higher vibrations, each revelation which we reach, changing the world through our expression of it.”¹⁶⁶

Indeed, changing the world was the expressed aim of the Theosophical Society and related metaphysical traditions, as they attempted to conduct religion safely past the obstacle of scientific materialism and bring about a new age marked by the “universal brotherhood” of humanity.¹⁶⁷ This was more than just a distant ideal, however, as Theosophists argued that the world, following its inalterable evolutionary trajectory, was beginning to enter a new stage of development, marked by the revitalization of occult sciences and philosophies. Blavatsky and her followers asserted that a new, sixth

¹⁶⁴ Charlotte E. Woods, “The Rationale of Life,” *Theosophical Review* 17 (Sept., 1895-Feb., 1896): 125.

¹⁶⁵ Pelton, “Statement for Agnes Pelton Paintings.”

¹⁶⁶ Comfort, *Midstream*, 183.

¹⁶⁷ See Blavatsky, *Key to Theosophy*, 13, 31, 158.

root race was emerging, marked by unparalleled spiritual power as well as scientific advancement. As Blavatsky wrote, “even now, under our very eyes, the new Race and Races are preparing to be formed... it is in America that the transformation will take place, and has already silently commenced.”¹⁶⁸

Pelton was convinced of the veracity of this pronouncement, and believed that her art served to advance the evolution of the world toward the new age. The spiritual states which she felt she accessed as she painted, and which she felt her viewers could approach as they encountered her work, were sources of the wisdom that would spread across the world as the next root race emerged. She considered it her calling to help advance the state of humanity through her work. To Pelton, the goal of the artist was not merely to create beauty, but to “triumph over darkness by illumination.”¹⁶⁹

Her associates held similar views about the role of art, and believed that advanced creativity played a crucial role in furthering the ascending evolution of the world. Comfort claimed that he could recognize members of the sixth root race among his young students. Contemporary youth, he felt, were so dramatically unlike their parents that “the difference between [the] two generations has been not a normal and superficial crack, but an abyss. The Old has reached its climacteric point of destructivity.”¹⁷⁰ He continued, “Artists, singers, painters, and idealists will be the heroes of the generations to come,” as their work would present the truth which comes through universally recognizable “Beauty.” He advanced beauty as an unassailable

¹⁶⁸ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine* 2:444.

¹⁶⁹ Pelton, “Statement for Agnes Pelton Paintings.”

¹⁷⁰ Comfort, *The Hive*, 18.

measure of veracity: “All that is beautiful is good, all that is good must be beautiful... This does not mean that we must love things merely because they are beautiful, but because of the truth we know to be in them, manifest in their beauty.”¹⁷¹ Thus, by creating beauty, artists gave the world one of its most important sources of truth. Comfort asserted that arts instruction would be of more lasting significance in developing the “New Race” than any other form of education.¹⁷²

Pelton framed her theory of religiously meaningful aesthetics as a response to the conditions of modernity; she felt that the traditional conventions of academic art were insufficient to convey the spiritual meaning that she intended for her work. A sympathetic critic saw her work as a “new trend,” asserting that her abstract work “transcends the purely material and becomes a part of the metaphysical order.”¹⁷³ Pelton understood her modernist style, however, not as a completely novel innovation, but as a new strategy for reaching the same level of numinous meaning that ancient art had achieved. She accepted Dow’s premise that artists in the distant past, particularly Native Americans, had a close connection to the universal source of inspiration that she sought to access in her own work. American Indian artists, Dow argued, were intimately acquainted with the natural processes and cycles of the earth.¹⁷⁴ Dow’s description of the “elemental motifs” that pervaded Native American art mirror’s Pelton’s conception of universal, archetypal symbolism. Both believed that the most

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 20, 187.

¹⁷² See Ibid., 34.

¹⁷³ Alma May Cook, “Transcendental Painting Group Holds Attention of the Art World,” *Los Angeles Evening Herald and Express*, 8 Apr., 1939.

¹⁷⁴ See Moffat, 123; Hutchinson, 110-115.

important role of art was not to signify specific meanings, but to evoke the ineffable through images, reaching the universal basis of human expression.

In Pelton's metaphysical religious view, images from ancient art functioned exactly as she envisioned her own paintings, as portals to spiritual knowledge.

Understanding the specific symbolic significance of an artwork was unimportant in this conception, as reflection on the object could allow the individual mind access to the universal mind. Like Dow, Pelton considered the interpretation of ancient symbols as secondary to the overarching recognition that they expressed religious concepts on a universal level.¹⁷⁵

Occasionally, imaginary forms from ancient art came to Pelton while she was meditating, like the Aztec carving that she described to Jane Comfort (Fig. 4).¹⁷⁶ She made no attempt to explain the form, other than to draw a sketch of it, and note its relation to sacred architecture. Her depiction of the block includes what appear to be hieroglyphic characters, suggesting an inscription with a possible concrete meaning. It is tempting to read the linear form along the bottom of the drawing as an animal of some kind, with two legs and a horned head, but in Pelton's conception, the image was significant despite the lack of any interpretation. The inexpressible but spiritually significant emotions that arose from contemplating such an image were too rarefied to capture in words; the only description of the form that Pelton included in her letter, apart from her speculation on its original use as an element in sacred architecture, was

¹⁷⁵ See Moffat, 123.

¹⁷⁶ She recounted a similar vision of an obviously meaningful but inscrutable ancient object in a letter to Rudhyar in which she described a Chinese vase covered with inscriptions and symbolic imagery. See Pelton to Rudhyar, 27 Jul., 1939, Raymond Jonson Archives.

that the form, thought “faintly indicated,” was “beautiful.” In Will Comfort’s conception of the significance of beauty, this was meaning enough; as I described above, he argued that universal beauty was synonymous with universal truth.

Pelton’s imagined Aztec carving suggests the influence of her conception of ancient art on the development of her aesthetic theory. Artists, in her view, were instruments of revelation, linking viewers with the universal realm of ultimate truth. Their works were less important as symbols of religious content, and more significant as vehicles of spiritual progress, advancing the evolutionary progress of humanity. In Pelton’s view, ancient art was far more meaningful as exemplifying the potential religious function of art, rather than as an indexical record of historical ideas.

Where “Deep Streams Flow, Endlessly Renewing”

Pelton’s abstract paintings reflect her conception of ideal religious art, balancing the symbolic presentation of the specifics of her belief with abstract forms meant to spark a potentially religious contemplative experience, which would be unique to each individual viewer. Though Pelton maintained that the most important role of art was to provide access to a realm of universal knowledge beyond ordinary consciousness, she also recognized that her paintings were the best means by which she could explain and promote her own personal interpretations of metaphysical religion. Thus, while she intended her paintings as abstract “windows, opening to a view of a region not yet much visited consciously or by intention, an inner realm, rather than an outer landscape,” they included sufficient interpretable information to illuminate Pelton’s ideas about the geography of that inner realm.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁷ Pelton, “Statement for Agnes Pelton Paintings.”

Pelton's description of the inner realm, the universal consciousness from which inspiration arose, in reference to landscape is significant: most of her abstractions include at least a ground-line suggesting that they take place in a physical setting, and many portray recognizable features of earthly terrain. Most, like *Evensong*, 1934, (fig. 7) are set on a broad, cosmic scale; the horizon curves to show a vast, planetary perspective, and the sky fades from blue near the surface to a starry black in the upper distance. Far surpassing any terrestrial scale, the work elucidates a cosmology in which the Earth in its present state is only a speck in time and space, a tiny moment in an eternal and ever-changing universe. As Pelton wrote, the paintings she called abstractions were not completely non-objective, but were based to some degree on experiential reality, though not limited by the normal constraints of corporeal perception: "The forms and activities expressed are no doubt related to experience, but as distillations and seen at that moment or on that plane which is neither past or future—perhaps aspects of both..."¹⁷⁸ Though she included recognizable elements of the visual world, she meant her paintings to transcend the ordinary boundaries of time and space.

Despite the vastness of Pelton's vision, the visual language she employed to express it drew on the specifics of her own cultural background, sited in a time and space subject to terrestrial interpretative analysis. *Evensong*, for example, despite its cosmic setting, refers to a familiar religious practice common to a number of Christian denominations in which congregants gather late in the day, generally for a service of prayer and singing. Though it is unlikely that any of the churches with which Pelton or

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

her family were affiliated actually conducted such services, “evensong” was a common metonym in contemporary writing signifying constant devotion.¹⁷⁹ The immediate emotive impact of Pelton’s image corresponds closely with contemporary descriptions of the significance of the Evensong service; the starlit, rippling water suggests a tranquil, reflective mood akin to the “service of quiet and thoughtful worship, of meditation, of learning, remembering, and reflection” that Percy Dearmer described as the purpose of Evensong in *Everyman’s History of the Prayer Book*.¹⁸⁰ Furthermore, the title’s associations with music evoke Pelton’s description of the artist as an instrument, their work a melody capable of eliciting rarefied religious emotions.

Evensong encompasses complex layers of intertwined meaning that reflect the diversity of Pelton’s religious convictions. The sunset, presaging an eventual sunrise, was a common symbol of immortality, employed frequently across numerous religious groups in Pelton’s time. It was a particularly salient metaphor for Theosophists, as the daily rising and setting of the sun provided an apt metaphor of the unending cycle of death and rebirth in which Theosophy situated humanity. As Emmett Small wrote in “Sunset Reflexions,” 1926, “The sun had set; and so our lives set; but Death? ... Death died long ago to all who are awake; it never was born to Theosophists. To them it is a

¹⁷⁹ Specific practices vary widely among churches that hold Evensong services; though the form originated with the Anglican Church, it is closely related to the Vespers of the Roman Catholic Church, and has been adopted by numerous denominations. In the United States, the service is most frequently associated with the Episcopal Church. See John Henry Blunt, *The Annotated Book of Common Prayer* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1907).

¹⁸⁰ Dearmer, Percy, *Everyman’s History of the Prayer Book* (Milwaukee: Young Churchman Co., 1915), 173.

time of serenity and peace and silence and aloofness from things unnecessary to real life.”¹⁸¹

Small’s description of the state an individual experienced after death, which Blavatsky characterized as a period of rest between incarnations, seems apt for the exceptionally peaceful mood of *Evensong*, in which soft, warm colors in the center fade gradually to deep, cool blues around the edges, and the rippling water and flowing smoke lull the viewer into a sense of serenity.¹⁸² Pelton’s work suggests the idea of death and rebirth through more than just the symbolic sunset; in a poem accompanying the painting, she wrote:

The evening stars glow softly down
Above a flowing urn
Day’s overflow that disappears
Within the sunset’s turn
A tear, a pearl, a flower white
A memory upon the night
Within the urn the fires are banked
Conserved and glowing
While underground the deep streams flow
Endlessly renewing.¹⁸³

Pelton’s poem evokes funereal imagery, referring to the vessel as an “urn,” and alluding to the flowers and tears common in contemporary grieving practice.¹⁸⁴ Simultaneously, it suggests that death is not a final end, and that the fire of any individual existence still

¹⁸¹ Emmett Small, Jr. “Sunset Reflexions,” *Theosophical Path* 30 (Jan.-Jun., 1926): 85.

¹⁸² Blavatsky, *Key to Theosophy*, 148.

¹⁸³ “Agnes Pelton Paintings,” c. 1956, Raymond Jonson Archives.

¹⁸⁴ In addition to its frequent use as a funereal symbol, the urn had particular significance for Theosophists. The Theosophical Society elicited significant public attention by advocating cremation in the late nineteenth century, among the first groups to do so in the United States. See Washington, 56-57. Pelton subscribed to a similar view; before her death, she arranged to have her body cremated, and her ashes buried in the San Jacinto mountains. Zakian, *Agnes Pelton, Poet of Nature*, 106.

burns safely within the urn, ready to find new expression in a new life, through the “endlessly renewing” stream of eternal progression.

On another level, *Evensong* refers to the cyclical nature of cosmic evolution which formed a key tenet of the metaphysical religions that Pelton studied. The painting reflects Theosophical writers’ use of “evening” as a theme representing more than just the end of any individual’s life, but the close of an era of cosmic time. This metaphor was especially common in descriptions of the then-current state of humanity, on the cusp of tremendous change with the anticipated passing of the fifth root race and rising of the sixth. In “Sunset Reflexions,” Small went on to compare the gradually fading light of the setting sun with a root race “sinking to rest” after working along their evolutionary path during the day.¹⁸⁵ Likewise, numerous Theosophists referred to the coming of the sixth root race as the “dawn” of a new age.¹⁸⁶

Evensong pictures a vessel with fluid streams of smoke or vapor flowing out, the “overflow” from the previous day in Pelton’s poem. Pelton depicts the radiance of an earlier era spilling out and enlivening the next, a process that operated in several different contexts in Theosophy. The wisdom possessed by ancient peoples, in Blavatsky’s assertion, provided the core material that would allow late nineteenth century Western cultures to escape the cultural malaise induced by scientific materialism.¹⁸⁷ In reference to this concept, the vase in Pelton’s *Evensong* might

¹⁸⁵ Small, 82.

¹⁸⁶ See Michael W. Ashcraft, *The Dawn of a New Cycle: Point Loma Theosophists and American Culture* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2002), 180.

¹⁸⁷ See chapter one for an extensive discussion of the Theosophical writers’ views on this subject.

represent a generalized antiquity emanating lost religious knowledge, flowing out over the world once more after its rediscovery by the practitioners of metaphysical religions.

Perhaps more crucially, though, Theosophists held that the birth of a new era or root race could only be accomplished through the death of the previous one. Dane Rudhyar compared this process to the lifecycle of an annual plant. At the end of the season, a plant goes to seed, expending its stored energy and dying in the process. The resulting seeds, however, form the nucleus of the next generation of plants in the new season. The “process of planetary life,” he wrote, is governed by the law that the “plant must die in order that the seed be fruitful.”¹⁸⁸ And, as Rudhyar intended his metaphor to suggest, the seed from the previous root race gives the next a basis from which to build and further evolve—without the contributions of eras past, every new succession of humanity would have to begin completely anew.

Another clue to the painting’s significance is Pelton’s inclusion of a symbol that she employed in several other works—Venus, the bright star in the upper right hand corner.¹⁸⁹ In Theosophical literature, the planet was an emblem of eternal life, as it was both the evening star and the morning star, heralding the close of day, but also the return of the sun in the morning, and, by extension, the cycle of death and rebirth through reincarnation.¹⁹⁰ Pelton’s use of this symbol fits closely with the theme of *Evensong*, the evening star signaling the promise of the eventual return of the morning.

¹⁸⁸ Rudhyar, *The Transcendental Movement in Painting*, 3.

¹⁸⁹ Pelton identified Venus in the painting in a sketch in her notebook, Agnes Pelton Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [3426-698].

¹⁹⁰ See Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine* 2:36.

By including Venus prominently in her painting, Pelton alluded to themes of fertility, generation, and renewal, associations that the planet carried even outside of a Theosophical context. In classical mythology, Venus was affiliated with love and sexual passion, but also with fertility and childbirth.¹⁹¹ Theosophists argued that a range of female deities with similar associations were actually different manifestations of the same original archetype; Blavatsky held that Isis, Ishtar, Venus, and the Virgin Mary were all expressions of the same entity, representations of the generative principle in nature, the force driving the evolutionary progress of the cosmos.¹⁹²

In *Evensong*, this significance is apparent in the combined symbolism of the planet Venus alongside the vessel; pots and other open, concave containers had been employed as symbols of female sexuality from the early Medieval era in Western art, and thus associated with themes of creation, generation, and fertility.¹⁹³ Zakian described the vessel in *Evensong* as “a clear association of nature’s abundance with a feminine, procreative force.”¹⁹⁴ In a similar vein, Sheley wrote that “Pelton saw the vessel as a feminine procreative force, as a womb-like shape giving birth to flowing waters.”¹⁹⁵

¹⁹¹ See the extensive contemporary bibliography on this subject in H. J. Rose, *A Handbook of Greek Mythology, Including its Extension to Rome* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1929).

¹⁹² Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled* (Adyar, India: Theosophical Publishing Company, 1972), vol. II, 95-97.

¹⁹³ See, for example, Ernst Gombrich, *Symbolic Images: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance* (London: Phaidon, 1978), 124.

¹⁹⁴ Zakian, “Agnes Pelton and Georgia O’Keeffe: the Window and the Wall,” in *Illumination: the Paintings of Georgia O’Keeffe, Agnes Pelton, Agnes Martin, and Florence Miller Pierce*, ed. Karen Moss (London: Merrell, 2009), 80.

¹⁹⁵ Sheley, “Bringing Light to Life,” 105.

An earlier painting by Pelton on a similar theme incorporates even more evident sexual symbolism, with the planet Venus emblemizing the generative process on both earthly and cosmic levels. *Star Gazer*, 1929 (fig. 8) depicts an unopened pink and white flower bud, set against a luminescent vessel similar in to the one Pelton painted in *Evensong*, if somewhat less elongated. Also as in *Evensong*, this urn glows with an inner radiance, a cool green-white that sets it off from the yellow and red sunset depicted on the horizon.¹⁹⁶ Pelton's procreative imagery is apparent in the superimposition of the phallic flower bud over the womb-like center of the vessel—a sexual union whose energy and creative potential is expressed in the glowing radiance of the vase.

Despite the coincidental resemblance of the flower in *Stargazer* to the lily of the same name, that hybrid was not bred until 1978, and was unknown to Pelton; instead, the painting is named for an 1807 poem by William Wordsworth.¹⁹⁷ In "Star-Gazers," Wordsworth described an unruly crowd in a London square, waiting by turn to pay a canny showman for a view through a telescope. He used the image to criticize contemporary scientists, whom he felt were investigating nature with a nearsighted view, belittling the majesty of the universe by reducing the observable world to a collection of observable facts. Wordsworth asked, "the silver Moon with all her Vales, and Hills of mightiest fame / Do they betray us when they're seen? and are they but a name?", and then, in an overt condemnation of scientific materialism, wrote:

¹⁹⁶ Pelton clarified in a letter to Jane Levington Comfort that the painting was meant to show the sun setting, rather than rising: "It was an after glow over the hills, with Venus close in the darkening sky..." Pelton to Jane Levington Comfort, 16 Nov., 1957, Letters from Agnes Pelton to Jane Levington Comfort (Jane Annixter)1934-1959, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

¹⁹⁷ William Wordsworth, *The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 322-323.

Whatever be the cause, 'tis sure that they who pry and pore
Seem to meet with little gain, seem less happy than before:
One after One they take their turns, nor have I one espied
That doth not slackly go away, as if dissatisfied.¹⁹⁸

Pelton's appropriation of Wordsworth's title suggests not so much a rejection of science as a disavowal of the conception that science alone could interpret the universe. She believed that the beauty of the cosmos was diminished when a sense of underlying purpose and ultimate progression were eliminated from one's view of the world. *Star Gazer* depicts the heavens not as the unthinking crowd in Wordsworth's poem saw it, but as an active, evolving, and purposeful realm. Pelton portrays Venus as figuring the underlying forces pervading the universe, guiding the progressive development of humanity.

Pelton's use of the flower bud is significant, as flowers are also deep-rooted symbols of female sexuality. The bud about to open served, alongside the planet Venus and the open vessel, as a potent metaphor for the generative force driving the process of natural and cosmic evolution. Pelton was aware of Georgia O'Keeffe's close-up flower paintings and even commented in her notebook that they exhibited "nice decorative beauty," but "are not seen primarily inside, in the realm of Ether."¹⁹⁹ Pelton apparently felt that O'Keeffe's images of flowers were aesthetically pleasing, but had no transcendent meaning.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid. See Walter F. Cannon, "The Normative Role of Science in Early Victorian Thought," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 25, no. 4 (Oct.-Dec., 1964): 487-502 for an exposition of Wordsworth's work within the context of early-nineteenth century science.

¹⁹⁹ Pelton's journal, Agnes Pelton Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [3426:0604]. Sheley and Zakian have debated over the actual author of the remarks. Sheley noted that they were concluded by the inscription, "GMP abt O'Keefe," suggesting that Pelton copied them from another source or summarized a conversation; Zakian asserted that regardless of its origin, Pelton's decision to include the text in her journal without comment suggest her agreement with its sentiment. See Sheley, "Bringing Light to Life," 95, n. 182; Zakian, "The Window and the Wall," 84, n. 5.

When Pelton was at work on *Star Gazer*, critics were debating the significance of Georgia O’Keeffe’s large-scale paintings of abstracted flowers. As Marilyn Hall Mitchell noted, this discourse had a marked sexist bent, as writers interpreted the flower paintings as an improper expression of female sexuality, a threat to the hegemonic structure of Western society which favored a perceived masculine, “external,” and active creativity, as opposed to its feminine, “internal,” and passive counterpart.²⁰⁰ Marcia Brennan detailed the numerous instances in which Stieglitz and sympathetic artists and critics actively promoted O’Keeffe’s work as inward-reflecting “corporeal transparency... identifying O’Keeffe’s body as the central reference point for her paintings...”²⁰¹

As a female artist painting abstracted flower forms during this period, Pelton must have recognized this potential reading of her work. Sheley noted that reviewers of her work during her lifetime often focused on her paintings of flowers, suggestive of the sexist contemporary commonplace that the subject was well suited to female artists.²⁰² Though writers at the time did not explicitly note the sexual connotations of Pelton’s floral imagery, this connection has not escaped the attention of modern critics, many of whom have explicitly compared Pelton’s work with O’Keeffe’s. Christopher Knight, for example, in “Forget Georgia; Agnes Finally Gets her Due,” read her depictions of flowers as autobiographical expressions of her sexual fulfillment through painting.

²⁰⁰ Marilyn Hall Mitchell, “Sexist Art Criticism: Georgia O’Keeffe: A Case Study,” *Signs* 3, no. 3 (Spring, 1978): 681-687.

²⁰¹ Marcia Brennan, *Painting Gender, Constructing Theory: the Alfred Stieglitz Circle and American Formalist Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 121-123.

²⁰² Sheley, “Bringing Light to Life,” 161-163.

Noting that she “isn’t known to have formed any long-term romantic attachments,” he argued that “painting itself became a fecund womb that gave birth to Agnes Pelton.”²⁰³

Less spuriously, Sheley argued that Pelton’s paintings of flowers constituted a form of “female self-empowerment,” drawing on the erotic symbolism of the flower, but taking control of its meaning in order to disavow earlier conceptions linking flowers to passive (and thus sexually available) female subjects. Instead, she appropriated the positive aspects of flowers in an active, assertive manner. As she wrote, “Pelton used and then rejected the iconography of woman-as-flower and, ultimately, developed the floral symbol to stand for *eros* as an internal, creative force in her work... The significance of Pelton’s work with flowers lies in her reshaping the floral image in her paintings, moving from the disempowerment *of* woman to the empowerment *by* woman.”²⁰⁴

In this respect, Pelton’s use of a flower form in *Star Gazer* seems a conscious attempt to elevate an emblem generally associated with female passivity to a position of active power. The flower bud in *Star Gazer* inverts the expected gendered associations of flowers, as it takes the active, fertilizing role in the creative process—the bright white tip of the phallic flower seems to ignite the glowing light within the vessel, sparking the creative, generative force that the urn represents. Sheley interpreted Pelton’s work within the framework of contemporary feminist thought, demonstrating that her avoidance of “predictable feminine roles and behaviors,” and active attempt to “claim... space previously belonging to men—in the galleries, in the studio, in the measure of

²⁰³ Christopher Knight, “Forget Georgia; Agnes Finally Gets Her Due,” *Los Angeles Times*, 19 Mar., 1995: 52, 81.

²⁰⁴ Sheley, “Bringing Light to Life,” 164, 168, 182.

achievement, in the printed praise of critics,” mirrored the celebration of “the feminine” in her artwork.²⁰⁵

Pelton’s religion also informed her feminist views. As Joy Dixon has argued, the Theosophical Society, as one of the most socially liberal major religious organizations of the early twentieth century, was particularly receptive to the issue of women’s rights. As she noted, Blavatsky’s vision of a “universal brotherhood of humanity” insisted on sexual as well as racial equality.²⁰⁶ Annie Besant, the second president of the Theosophical Society, was an outspoken proponent of women’s suffrage.²⁰⁷ Theosophists argued that women had been leaders of the world’s ancient religions, and posited that a revival of lost wisdom would restore gender equality; one biographer proclaimed Blavatsky as a “Modern priestess of Isis.”²⁰⁸ Post-Theosophists continued to promote radical gender equality; Helena Roerich wrote about the “Mother” principle inherent in her universal conception of the divine, asserting that a balance of male and female forces was essential in the ongoing process of creation. “There is no life, no expression of spirit,” she wrote, “without the Mother of the Universe, the Great Matter of All-Being.”²⁰⁹

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 59. Sheley discusses Pelton in the context of early twentieth century feminism in 57-70.

²⁰⁶ Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 3-4.

²⁰⁷ J. K. Chopra, *Women in the Indian Parliament* (New Delhi: Mittal, 1993), 13.

²⁰⁸ This is the title of a work by Vsevolod Solovyoff, published a few years after her death. See *A Modern Priestess of Isis*, trans. Walter Leaf (London: Longmans, Green, 1895).

²⁰⁹ Helena Roerich, *Letters of Helena Roerich*, vol. I, ed. V. L. Dutko (New York: Agni Yoga Society: 1954).

Pelton referred to a similar concept in a letter to Jane Comfort, in which she wrote that she felt “the Mother’s presence” while meditating—she expressed that sentiment in an abstract work, *Mother of Silence*, 1933 (Fig. 9).²¹⁰ The painting portrays the same glowing white orbs, symbols that Pelton frequently employed to represent ultimate, “universal” truth, but arranged so that they evoke the form of a seated figure. *Mother of Silence* alludes to Western European art, as the blue tint in the central section suggests the traditional color of the Virgin Mary’s robe. The fine gold lines radiating out from around the ovoid “head” suggest a halo. Zakian noted the influence of Asian art, as well, describing the form as a “buddha-like figure.”²¹¹ Pelton’s work drew from all these types of sacred imagery, but created a new form that reflected her understanding of the female aspect of divine force, derived from her study of metaphysical religion. *Mother of Silence* suggests Theosophist Frances Swiney’s characterization of the “law of Nature” as “always fundamental and causal in all stages of evolution, founded as it is on the underlying basic mother-principle of Life.”²¹² Rather than an embodied figure, Pelton’s *Mother of Silence* portrays the generative principle of nature, the source of creation, as a constellation of radiant energies.

The cosmic forms in *Mother of Silence* tie Pelton’s conception of generative power back to *Star Gazer* and *Evensong*, both of which portray the planet Venus. As Helena Roerich wrote, “The star of the Mother of the World is the planet Venus. In 1924 this planet for a short time came unusually near to the Earth. Its rays were poured

²¹⁰ Quoted in Zakian, *Agnes Pelton, Poet of Nature*, 76.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Frances Swiney, *The Ancient Road* (London: G. Bell, 1918), 139.

on Earth, and this created many new powerful and sacred combinations which will yield great results. Many feminine movements were kindled by these powerful rays.”²¹³

Pelton’s use of Venus as a symbol of cosmic generation may have been directly inspired by the astrological significance of the 1924 event, as she painted *Star Gazer* the following year. In any case, Pelton clearly associated the planet with the symbolism of vessels and flowers, representing the active female force that she believed drove the ongoing evolution of the world.

As I describe above, *Evensong* alludes not just to the eternal progression of an individual through multiple lifetimes, but the cyclical evolution of the world through series of root races. The white vapor streaming out of the vessel represents wisdom from past eras flowing out of over the earth, ushering in the dawn of a new age, with Venus, the star of the evening and the morning, presiding over the process. *Evensong* represents the waning of the fifth root race and the anticipated advent of the sixth, but it also references the previous stage in this evolutionary cycle, in which the fourth root race gave way to the fifth. Blavatsky claimed that Venus was an emblem of the fourth root race; the “preceptor of the Daityas, the giants of the Fourth Race,” was represented by Shukra, or Venus, in her account of Hindu tradition.²¹⁴ Further, she asserted that the flood that destroyed the Atlanteans had been presaged by a celestial omen involving Venus changing its size and color.²¹⁵ Numerous subsequent writers alluded to the association of Venus with the fourth root race—some even argued that advanced beings

²¹³ Helena Roerich, 268.

²¹⁴ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine*, 2:35.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

from the planet had traveled to the Earth during the Atlantean era to help spur intellectual and technological development.²¹⁶ Helena Roerich, coauthor of the *Agni Yoga* texts, wrote that Christ, Buddha, and Lord Maitreya (the future Buddha) “came from Venus at the dawn of the formation of physical man.”²¹⁷

Pelton’s emblematic use of the planet Venus in *Evensong* and *Star Gazer* refers to the fourth root race as a source of the knowledge that would allow the fifth ascend out of the mire of materialist philosophy and evolve into the next era. The vessels in the paintings allude to the peoples that Theosophical writers associated with this ancient wisdom—without any decoration or details to align them with any particular cultural tradition, they represent a generalized antiquity and accord with the Theosophical tenet that all ancient religions expressed the same fundamental truth. Pelton’s views on pottery as an art-form, however, suggest a connection between these images and the ancient cultures that Theosophists specifically associated with the fourth root race: the Native Americans.

As Dow’s student and teaching assistant, Pelton would have been familiar with his conception of pottery as among the most important forms of art because of its direct and immediate connection with the earth. As Elizabeth Hutchinson has written, Dow learned Pueblo pottery techniques from Frank Hamilton Cushing. Cushing was an early Southwestern anthropologist famous for his work with the Zuni, as well as for his advocacy of “participant observation,” the idea that an ethnographer could learn best by

²¹⁶ See, for example, C. W. Leadbeater, *A Textbook of Theosophy* (Los Angeles: Theosophical Publishing House, 1918), 130-133.

²¹⁷ Helena Roerich, vol. II, 27.

actually participating in the culture he or she was observing.²¹⁸ Dow took this approach with his students, as I describe above, asserting that they could learn from the same “primal instincts” that had inspired primitive artists if they practiced similar techniques and means of production. He used Native American pottery as examples for his students to copy, as depicted in the photograph of his summer school at Ipswich, Massachusetts (Fig. 6).

Notably, the only student work clearly shown in the photograph, the undecorated piece on the right side of the table, resembles the vessels in Pelton’s works. All share wide openings with pronounced lips, and all are perfectly symmetrical, curvilinear forms of the sort that typically characterize hand-coiled pots. Pelton, who was a teaching aid at the school where the photograph was made, must have absorbed Dow’s lessons on the importance of pottery within Native American cultures, as art that exemplified their alleged closeness to the earth. Her images of vessels as repositories of ancient wisdom share in this significance, suggesting that the people who were presumed to be the last remnants of the Atlantean root race could contribute spiritual knowledge that was vital to the continued evolutionary progression of humanity.

Like the light preserved in the vessels in her paintings, Pelton believed that the wisdom from Native Americans, along with other ancient cultures from around the world, would be instrumental in bringing about the next evolutionary stage of the earth. The ruins she depicted in *Future*, and *Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* conveyed her sense of the ongoing importance of archaic religious ideas in the synthesis of knowledge that characterized the work of Theosophy and other metaphysical religions.

²¹⁸ Hutchinson, 113.

It was this project of syncretism, she held, that would ultimately result in a new age of enlightenment, marked by the ascendance of spirituality over materialism.

Furthermore, Pelton's understanding of art from Native American and other supposedly ancient cultures was instrumental in her formation of an ideal aesthetic for religious art. She maintained that ancient art allowed contemplative viewers to directly access the "universal" spiritual consciousness underlying all physical reality. This was a realm that the American Indians, as the alleged remnants of the fourth root race, were thought to be closely connected to, through their intimate spiritual knowledge of nature. Pelton's belief that abstract art could produce this kind of transcendent experience was dependent on her understanding of the similar function of ancient art.

Pelton drew from a wide range of metaphysical sources, and synthesized disparate Theosophical conceptions into a coherent aesthetic theory. Her work, as well as her philosophy, directly influenced her associates in the Transcendental Painting Group. As Raymond Jonson and Emil Bistram developed their own ideas about the relationship between art and religion and the aesthetics of an ideal religious art, they looked to Pelton's work as a model. As I describe in chapter four, Jonson, in particular, interpreted Pelton's abstractions as exemplifying the potential of non-objective art for eliciting an authentic spiritual experience.

While Pelton was interested in a generalized sense of antiquity that included the ancient inhabitants of the California deserts along with other cultures from around the world, Bistram and Jonson focused specifically on the Native Americans of northern New Mexico. As they interpreted American Indian arts and cultures, however, they continually referenced the same overarching themes from metaphysical religion that had

informed Pelton's work. They adapted Theosophical conceptions of cultural evolution, an expected new age, and the cyclical progression of the universe as they attempted to understand the role of Native American ideas within a synthetic religious art.

Chapter Three

Emil Bisttram: the Art of Symbolic Synthesis

In around 1935, Emil Bisttram wrote that in the coming “New Age,” the artist would “become the synthesizer of the reality of religion and the truth of science.”¹ Echoing Helena Blavatsky’s claim in the subtitle of her 1888 work, *The Secret Doctrine: the Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy*, Bisttram made the objective of his art to convey his Theosophically-based understanding of spirituality. Bisttram referred to himself as a religious artist. He painted numerous works on religious themes, participated in church-sponsored exhibitions, and lectured on the value of art to religion and of religion to art.² In perhaps the most dramatic move in his attempt to express more fully the “reality of religion” in his painting, he relocated to the place that he considered the last remaining native spiritual center in the United States: the Pueblos of northern New Mexico.

Bisttram believed that art was a vital tool in the advancement of culture beyond materialist philosophy and toward a new, integral, and universal religion in the coming new age. He looked to the Native Americans of the Southwest as possessing the ancient

¹ Quoted in John William Rogers, “Taos Artists Speak their Mind,” unidentified newspaper article, 1933, Emil Bisttram Papers, Archives of American Art [2892:184].

² Many of these exhibitions were small shows organized by churches, and regrettably little documentation exists, but among Bisttram’s papers in the Archives of American Art are newspaper clippings including: “Forty Works in Religious Arts Exhibition,” Taos News, 27 Aug., 1970 [2787:455]; “Broadmoor Community Church Fine Arts Exhibit,” unidentified newspaper clipping, 1963 [2894:79]; “Art for Worship Show, Mulane Art Center, Topeka, KS,” unidentified newspaper clipping, 1964 [2894]; “Religious Art Show at 1st Presbyterian Church,” unidentified newspaper clipping [2894: 530]. Though Bisttram’s papers do not include texts or notes from any of his talks on art and religion, newspaper articles provided some documentation. See “Art, Religion to be Subject of Talk Today,” unidentified newspaper clipping [2787:503]; “Bisttram Traces Relations of Art with Philosophy,” unidentified newspaper clipping [2787:509].

wisdom that he hoped to synthesize with modern knowledge in a vital new form of spiritually significant art. In his images of contemporary Pueblo and Hopi religious ceremonies, Bisttram explicitly related their systems of design to his own conception of an ideal aesthetic for religious art.

Although Bisttram's belief was central to his art, art historians have devoted insufficient attention to the role that Theosophy and related forms of metaphysical religion played in his abstract aesthetic. Nearly all the scholarship on Bisttram suffers from the same omission: writers have noted his use of occult, esoteric, or religious symbolism, but failed to provide any adequate framework for understating its significance. An important move away from this trend was Ruth Pasquine's 2000 dissertation, "The Politics of Redemption: Dynamic Symmetry, Theosophy, and Swedenborgianism in the Art of Emil Bisttram."³ Pasquine excavated a tremendous amount of primary source material, illuminating the depth of Bisttram's commitment to metaphysical religion. Her work examines well over a hundred paintings by Bisttram, suggesting sources from a wide range of religious, philosophical, and artistic discourses. I build on Pasquine's project by subjecting a smaller body of Bisttram's work to much more detailed analysis, demonstrating that his understanding of American Indian cultures played an integral role in the formulation of his aesthetic theory.

Scholarly accounts of Bisttram's interest in Native American cultures, arts, and religions, are also lacking, failing to provide any clear conception of how his paintings on Indian themes were related to his larger project of creating an ideal religious art. Indeed, most descriptions of Bisttram's work take images of Pueblo dances for granted,

³ Pasquine, "The Politics of Redemption."

considering them an unremarkable subject for an artist working in New Mexico. Jackson Rushing was the first to seriously probe the significance of this body of work, arguing that the abstract nature of Southwestern Native American art inspired Bisttram's move toward non-representational painting.⁴ Though Rushing's work positioned Bisttram within the context of primitivism in modernist art of the United States, it provided only a limited account of the significance that Indian cultures played in Bisttram's art; in demonstrating the relationship between Bisttram's conceptions of Native American art and his metaphysical views, I provide a richer understanding of his religious aesthetic.

Bisttram's images, though superficially celebratory of Pueblo cultures, participated in the contemporary religious discourse that interpreted the eventual demise of Native cultures as an inevitable result of evolutionary processes. Bisttram's synthetic religion was centered on Theosophy's proposal of a radical fusion of world religions, which ostensibly refused to give primacy to Christianity. As I describe in chapter one, the resulting reorientation of adherents' views respecting diverse religious and cultural practices played a significant role in the development of liberal religion into the 20th century.⁵ Theosophists' interpretations of other cultures, however, were not always as free from Western biases as they intended or claimed. Likewise, despite their claims to sympathetic accuracy, Bisttram's depictions of Native Americans perpetuate a range of contemporary stereotypes. His representations of ceremonial dances celebrate Pueblo

⁴ Jackson Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde*: 85-90.

⁵ See Albanese, chapter 6.

religion, but from a primitivist perspective that interpreted native cultures as valuable for their antiquity, but ultimately destined to vanish.

Following the tenor of Theosophical discourse in general, Bisttram's attitude toward people he considered "primitive" was markedly ambivalent. As I describe in chapter one, the Theosophical Society was ardently anticolonialist in its promotion of racial equality and opposition to the Christianization of European colonies in Asia. Theosophists actively supported the study of indigenous religions by native peoples, as well as by Christians in the West.⁶ Nonetheless, Theosophists at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries were not immune to the pervasive influence of contemporary theories of cultural evolution, which tied advancement to industrial progress. While Theosophical writers advocated learning from the spiritual knowledge possessed by "primitive" peoples, they seldom inferred any advantage in emulating them in any other respect. The aim of Theosophy was not simply to excavate lost religious truths, but to usher in a new enlightened era by combining ancient wisdom with modern scientific learning. As civilizations continued to evolve, Theosophists anticipated the disappearance of "ancient" cultures through absorption into a universal modern society.

Theosophy encouraged Bisttram's respect for indigenous American cultures, but he shared its aim of synthesizing aspects of those cultures with Western scientific knowledge, initiating a new society advanced on both physical and spiritual planes. Bisttram followed Theosophical writers in celebrating the perceived ancient, spiritual authenticity of Pueblo religion, while simultaneously insisting on the superiority of the

⁶ See Prothero, *The White Buddhist*.

new synthetic culture whose development he felt he was aiding. Bisttram's paintings of Native American subjects reflect his belief in the religious significance of Pueblo ceremonialism, but incisive interrogation of his work demonstrates that his primary intent was not to address Native American cultures on their own terms, but to incorporate aspects of their religious traditions into the broader, combinative spirituality of Theosophy.

Sources of Bisttram's Art and Religion

Born in Hungary in 1895, Emil Bisttram emigrated with his family in 1906, and boxed semi-professionally in New York City under the name "Battling Bennett," before seeking out a career in commercial art.⁷ Despite his loquaciousness on religious subjects, Bisttram was reticent about how his interest in Theosophy first developed, or what religious views he might have held prior to his study of metaphysical traditions. Much like Pelton, Bisttram had a strong background in Theosophy, but was open to new ideas from the various post-Theosophical groups and other related forms of metaphysical religion. This was hardly atypical during the early twentieth century—as the Theosophical Society's influence began to wane, other organizations built on the relatively coherent and orderly structure that Theosophy provided, and then added their own new interpretative strategies and supporting texts.⁸ Bisttram was particularly interested in a nascent group of teachings that would coalesce into what is now called

⁷ Wiggins, 14-17. Bisttram's last name was originally spelled "Bistran." In 1931, Nancy Lansdale, who claimed the ability to read symbols in the chromatic "aura" emitted by an individual's body, advised Bisttram of his true name, "an energy pattern... your identification mark, your Crest or your Seal..." in a document preserved in the Bisttram Papers at the Harwood Museum. Lansdale's work is discussed in Gina Cerrinara, "The Candid Camera of the Cosmos," *Searchlight* 6, no. 7 (May, 1954): 4-7.

⁸ See Hammer, 81-82.

“New Age” religion. His view was firmly rooted in the established Theosophical tradition, however, and he referred to himself simply as a Theosophist.⁹

Early in his art career, Bisttram sought out artists with strong backgrounds in Theosophy and related traditions—among his first teachers were Jay Hambidge and Nicholas Roerich.¹⁰ Hambidge is best known for *The Elements of Dynamic Symmetry*, which asserted that various ancient cultures knew of design principles that determined the proportions of the human body and other organic forms.¹¹ The system was based on the application of the Fibonacci Sequence to the calculation of ratios between a composition’s various formal elements. Though Hambidge did not directly relate his work to any metaphysical religious system, it was celebrated by Theosophists and other occultists for evincing an archetypal symbolic structure underlying ancient religious art. As LaFayette Plummer wrote in the *Theosophical Path*, these geometrical principles were recognized by the ancient Greeks as demonstrating “the working of Cosmic Intelligence... they hold within themselves the keys to some of the most recondite secrets of the universe.”¹² Bisttram understood dynamic symmetry in a similarly religious sense, and Hambidge’s work would play an important role in his formulation of an ideal aesthetic for religious art.¹³

⁹ See Henry Hunt, *Emil Bisttram: Recent and Early Paintings* (Colorado Springs: George Nix Gallery, 1973), 2.

¹⁰ Wiggins, 16-18.

¹¹ See Jay Hambidge, *The Elements of Dynamic Symmetry*. New York: Brentano, 1926: xiv-xv.

¹² LaFayette Plummer, “The Golden Section,” *Theosophical Path* 43, no. 3 (Jan., 1934): 249.

¹³ See Joseph Traugott, “Fruit of the Divine: Dynamic Symmetry and the Spiritual Ideals of Emil Bisttram,” *El Palacio* 110, no. 3 (Fall, 2005): 24-26; Ruth Pasquine, “Emil Bisttram: Theosophical Drawing,” *PART 9* (online at <http://web.gc.cuny.edu/arhistory/part/part9/modernism/articles/pasqu.html>).

Roerich, a common influence on Pelton, Jonson, and Bisttram, was one of the most active and best recognized promoters of Theosophy in the United States during the 1920s and 30s. He and Bisttram came into contact around 1921, when Roerich was organizing a new school in New York, the Master Institute of United Arts, which taught music, dance, writing, and other subjects in addition to visual arts.¹⁴ In 1929, Roerich asked Bisttram to teach at the Institute, which he did for several years before moving to New Mexico in 1932.¹⁵ Roerich believed that the essential unity of all arts mirrored the ultimate underlying interconnectedness of humanity, one of the key principles of Theosophy. As the Master Institute's motto read, "Art will unify all humanity, art is one—indivisible. Art has its many branches, yet all are one. Art is the manifestation of the coming synthesis."¹⁶

Roerich's conception of "synthesis" was also a powerful and lasting influence on Bisttram. On one level, the idea that all arts were integrally related informed Bisttram's teaching practice, and he modeled his own art schools on Roerich's Master Institute. More fundamental to Roerich's theory, however, was the understanding that the synthesis of multiple art forms mirrored the greater unity among all humanity, which would find full expression in the anticipated new era—what he termed "the coming synthesis." This principle was a key component of Theosophical discourse, and undergirded the combinative approach of a range of related metaphysical religions.¹⁷

¹⁴ In 1949, the Master Institute was converted into the Nicholas Roerich Museum, which continues to operate as a museum and publishing house.

¹⁵ Wiggins, 17.

¹⁶ Mary Siegrist, "Master Institute of Roerich Museum," in *Message of 1929 Roerich Museum Series*. (New York: Roerich Museum, 1930), 106.

¹⁷ See Mark Bevir, "The West Turns Eastward," 747-767.

Roerich argued that studying art from the world's diverse cultures was equally important as studying their religious traditions, as art was a manifestation of the most essential, innate ideas, concepts that he believed were universal. As he wrote, "Perhaps physically separated souls can begin to understand one another through Art, the language of the highest blessings."¹⁸

Roerich's study of the world's religious and artistic traditions had taken him across Europe, Asia, and North America. In 1921, he traveled to New Mexico, where Edgar Hewett brought him to regional archeological sites and ceremonial dances at several of the Pueblos.¹⁹ Roerich's recollections of these experiences apparently inspired Bistram while the two were working together at the Master Institute; Bistram visited New Mexico for three months in 1930, and then moved permanently to Taos in 1932.²⁰ With scant sales during the depression, Bistram relied on teaching for a steady source of income. Immediately after arriving, he opened the Taos School of Fine Arts, where he taught Dynamic Symmetry, along with principles from Theosophy that one of his students, Florence Miller Pierce, remembered as being "mind-blowing to a good Catholic girl of seventeen."²¹

Bistram went to Taos in search of ancient wisdom, and quickly felt that he had found it. Captivated by the local Native American cultures, he traveled extensively and observed ceremonial dances at multiple Pueblos in his "tour of the Indian Country," as

¹⁸ Quoted in Drayer, 40.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 43-45.

²⁰ Wiggins, 18-19.

²¹ Quoted in Kathryn Gabriel, "Transcendental Painting: Paintings Inspired by the Landscapes of the Mind," *Quantum* 4, no. 1 (Spring, 1987): 8.

he called it, even going to the Hopi reservation in Western Arizona, a considerable trek on the roads of the era.²² His first depictions of Native Americans reflect his conception of their dramatic cultural difference, while conveying a sense of mystery. In *Pueblo Woman*, c. 1930 (fig. 10), Bisttram painted a single shrouded figure, who initially appears to be facing toward the viewer, her black cloak dissolving into an inky void. The figure's feet, however, are pointed away, suggesting that her back is turned toward the viewer, and that what appeared to be an opening in the clothing is only a shadow. Like the visually impenetrable cloak, dark slits outline openings into the buildings in the mid-ground, but Bisttram's cropped composition and black shadows offer no access into their interiors. The visual withholding and confusion of *Pueblo Woman* suggest Bisttram's initial frustrated fascination with the various Pueblo cultures—though he believed that they held uniquely important religious knowledge, he felt unable to access more than the outermost visible layers.

Convinced that closer observation would provide better understanding, Bisttram continued to visit the Pueblos and studied artifacts and written accounts of their cultures.²³ His subsequent works, as Pasquine wrote, were an attempt at “ethnographic accuracy.”²⁴ In *Hopi Indian Snake Dance*, 1933 (fig. 11), he depicted one of the most widely discussed and popular dances among tourists, the annual Hopi ceremony in which participants hold live rattlesnakes in their mouths. Both the subject and the style position the painting alongside contemporary primitivist images of Southwest Indians.

²² Wiggins, 23-24; Pasquine, 364.

²³ See Pasquine, 352-353.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 357.

Jan Matulka's drawing of the same subject, *Hopi Snake Dance No. 2*, 1918 (fig. 12) portrays the dancers with similarly exaggerated facial features—wide, narrow eyes, and broad, triangular noses, stereotypes that were in common currency among images of Native Americans at the time.²⁵ Both artists depicted the snakes with such schematized, crudely drawn heads that they resemble cartoons or children's drawings.

Pasquine cited the accuracy of Bisttram's details in costumes and body painting to suggest that he was aiming for ethnographic precision.²⁶ His roughly stylized figures, starkly outlined shapes, and heavily brushed, unmixed colors, however, suggest anything but an objective stance. Instead, they reflect the influence of modernist primitivists, like Emil Nolde, who associated freely expressive art styles with the allegedly unfettered life of archaic peoples. As Nolde wrote, "Primitive people begin making things with their fingers, with material in their hands. Their work expresses the pleasure of making. What we enjoy, probably, is the intense and often grotesque expression of energy, of life."²⁷ In his early images of Native American ceremonies, Bisttram attempted to capture the energy and vitality of the dance, employing an aesthetic that signaled allegiance with an allegedly primitive mentality. Bisttram emulated modernist painters, depicting the snake dancers according to generalized conceptions of the qualities of primitive art, in a style that had little to do with Native Americans' own aesthetics.

²⁵ For an account of Native American's own impressions of such stereotypes, see Eva Gruber, *Humor in Contemporary Native North American Literature: Reimagining Nativeness* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2008), esp. 146-147.

²⁶ Pasquine, 363-364.

²⁷ Quoted in Colin Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 131.

As he studied the ceremonial dances and visual arts of Southwestern Indians, however, Bisttram became convinced that they preserved not only traditional wisdom, but methods of conveying religious meaning through art that were lost to the West. Analyzing Native American art, he concluded that its aesthetic principles were ideally suited to presenting its underlying religious significance. He wrote, “I suddenly realized that these Indians had more on the ball than we westerners ever thought of having. They were never permitted to paint anything realistic. They were painting ideas. Something to do with the spirit of man’s inner nature... all symbolic paintings, beautifully done.”²⁸ This realization, Bisttram wrote, was dramatically influential on the course of his art: “This began a change in my whole life...all my years of studying Kandinsky’s *On The Spiritual in Art* suddenly came into focus, and from that point on I became seriously interested in abstraction.”²⁹

Bisttram counted Kandinsky’s volume as among the most important treatises on art, resonating with the earlier artist’s recognition of the inseparability between spirituality and creativity. As Bisttram wrote, “I being a theosophist, I knew what he was talking about—the creative process of how the atoms are built by nature or cosmic forces... and are created into forms.”³⁰ *On the Spiritual in Art* supported Bisttram’s belief that all physical entities were based on discernable spiritual archetypes, “architectural principles” as he called them.³¹ Bisttram set out to formulate a mode of

²⁸ Wiggins, 25.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Quoted in Hunt, 2. For the importance of Kandinsky’s work in early twentieth century American modernism, see Gail Levin and Marianne Lorenz, *Theme & Improvisation: Kandinsky & the American Avant-Garde 1912-1950* (Dayton, OH: Dayton Art Institute, 1992).

³¹ Hunt, 1.

painting that would allow him to convey this deeper spiritual reality and not merely the superficial appearance of physical things.

Native American art inspired Bisttram's return to Kandinsky and his interest in abstraction because, he felt, it gave him a model for expressing the spiritual structure behind the physical world. Bisttram believed that American Indians shared his understanding of architectural principles governing nature, which could be symbolically expressed. He interpreted the Native Americans' abstract work as reflecting the same essential motive as his own, to paint not just physical things in the world, but the underlying metaphysical structure of existence. Thus, he drew from the Southwestern Indian art he encountered in New Mexico as a source for his new mode of abstract painting. Bisttram became convinced that by studying Native American ceremonial art, he could develop a new and uniquely meaningful form of modernist painting.

Metaphysical Symbolism in Bisttram's Depictions of Indian Dances

Soon after his dramatic recognition of the importance of Native American art, Bisttram radically revised his depictions of Pueblo ceremonial dances. Bisttram worked out a new approach in a group of watercolors, which he called the *Dancing Gods* series. He reworked one of the images as a larger-scale oil painting the following year, *Eagle Dance*, 1934 (fig. 13).³² It depicts five dancers fractured into geometricized masks, wings, and legs, their bodies merged in a cubist-inspired collision of planes in the center

³² Pasquine, "The Politics of Redemption," 370, 374. Bisttram began the series in 1932, exhibited it in 1933, and expanded it in 1934 and later. The *Dancing Gods* series was first exhibited at the Delphic Studios in New York City, in 1933, an institution founded by Alma Reed to promote the revival of classical Hellenic culture in the United States. Reed was also interested in Theosophy and various forms of Occultism, and exhibited the work of Pelton and Jonson at her gallery, as well—she was also connected with Hambidge, Roerich, and Rudhyar. See Michael K. Schuessler's introduction to Reed's *Peregrina: Love and Death in Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007).

of the image. Unlike his earlier paintings that portrayed his impressions of the dances using his own formal language, derived mostly from European and American modernist predecessors, he relied heavily on Native American art styles in his conception of *Eagle Dance*.

In particular, Bisttram's choice of subject and elimination of any background setting in *Eagle Dance* suggests the influence of the Santa Fe Indian School artists. Pasquine identified paintings by Awa Tsireh (Alfonso Roybal) as sources for several works in the *Dancing Gods* series.³³ Bisttram may have known Tsireh's own version of the same subject, *Eagle Dancers*, 1917-1925 (fig. 14); whether or not he had seen this specific painting, he was certainly familiar with Tsireh's work, as Edgar Hewett, a patron of Tsireh and director of the Museum of New Mexico, had exhibited both his and Bisttram's work on multiple occasions.³⁴

Bisttram apparently took Awa Tsireh's aesthetic as an "authentic" Indian precedent for his style, borrowing the flattened forms of the dancing figures and essentially eliminating the background, while reinterpreting the subject in a Modernist vernacular. He began the *Dancing Gods* series in 1932, at a moment when Native American artists were receiving significant attention in the local and national press. In the same year, Dorothy Dunn founded the Studio of the Santa Fe Indian School, as a means of encouraging a renaissance in Native American painting while preserving the artistic idioms unique to the Pueblo peoples. Dunn and her associates overlooked the irony in saving indigenous art styles through the promotion of Western watercolor and

³³ Pasquine, 396.

³⁴ J. J. Brody, *Indian Painters and White Patrons* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1971), 85.

easel painting, and used reproductions of pottery designs, rock art, and Southwestern mural paintings as examples of the generic “Native” style that they encouraged their students to emulate.³⁵

Proponents of the Santa Fe Indian School style were eager to note the apparent formal similarities between their version of Native American art and contemporary modernist styles. This primitivist assertion arguably became self-fulfilling by driving the development of Native American studio art in a modernist direction at the same time that it seemed to establish a genuine correspondence between “primitive” and modern art. Bisttram’s *Eagle Dance* pushed this cycle even one step further by claiming the Modernist-influenced Santa Fe Indian School style as an authentic Native American precedent and then reworking it in an even more overtly modernist style. Despite the complex *mélange* of cultural influences underlying this appropriation, Bisttram intended his reference to contemporary Native American studio art to evince the depth of his understanding of Puebloan cultures, asserting that his image accurately conveyed the spiritual power inherent in the eagle dance itself.

Bisttram’s experience of Native American religions came not only through art, but also through firsthand encounter at public ceremonial dances. Bisttram likely witnessed the eagle dance sometime during his first visit to New Mexico in 1930, when he went on an extended tour of the region, viewing public ceremonies and presentations for tourists across the Southwest. The dancers, always male, bend down deeply and pivot with their arms outstretched, evoking the soaring flight of an eagle. The lavish costumes and remarkably avian motion of the performers made this one of the most

³⁵ Ibid., 128.

popular dances for tourists. Furthermore, because the eagle dance was not connected to a specific annual ceremonial, it could be performed at any time, presented in social or exhibition dances, and viewed by non-natives. Because of its flexible nature as well as its tremendous popularity among visitors, it was often performed at short notice for organized tour groups visiting the Pueblos.³⁶

Although the eagle dance received considerable attention by writers and artists, most accounts were simple laudatory descriptions that lacked any explanation of the dance's significance. Alice Corbin Henderson's observation, for example, was limited to the suggestion that "The Eagle Dance, performed by the San Ildefonso or Tesuque Pueblo, has all the delicacy and finesse of Pavlova's Dance of the Swan."³⁷ One of the best known artists in New Mexico during Bisttram's career, John Sloan, painted his own *Eagle Dance*, 1919 (fig. 15) which Bisttram knew from the reproduction in Erna Fergusson's book, *Dancing Gods*. Sloan's depiction focuses on the intense concentration of the dancers as they execute their motions; the angularity of the dancers' outstretched wings and sharply bent knees anticipates their rhythmic displacement and gives the viewer a sense of the pulsing beat of the drums in the background.

Bisttram seems to have taken Sloan's work as a challenge, departing markedly from the older artist's version with a far less naturalistic approach. While Bisttram likely intended his provocative response to promote his own aesthetic agenda, he further

³⁶ W. W. Hill, *The Ethnography of Santa Clara Pueblo, New Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982): 290-291; Jill D. Sweet, *Dances of the Tewa Pueblo Indians* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1985): 88.

³⁷ Quoted in Julia M. Buttree, *The Rhythm of the Redman* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1930), 60.

asserted through *Eagle Dance* his ability to surpass the mere recording of the dance's visual facts and approach its underlying religious significance. Bisttram insisted that modernist painting had the potential to convey meaning more effectively than representational art, and he used the abstract nature of Native American art to bolster this claim: "the symbolism, the abstract concept of Nature and her gods" in Native American art, he wrote, were what had first convinced him to begin "experimenting with symbolism in abstraction."³⁸

Coming to an understanding of the precise meaning behind the Pueblo dances, however, proved a significant challenge to Bisttram. Though many of the dances were open to the public, even the most inquisitive spectators were typically relegated to the periphery with tourist groups, and infrequently given any opportunity to explore beneath the most superficial layers of Pueblo society. Even contemporary anthropologists faced linguistic and cultural barriers that limited their attempts to survey Pueblo religions; this was compounded by the preference of many Pueblo people not to share sacred information with uninitiated outsiders.³⁹ Bisttram was even further removed, with no knowledge of any of the Pueblo languages, and limited interaction with the Pueblo—they appeared to him, as he expressed in early works like *Pueblo Woman*, as possessing an enormous wealth of knowledge, but yielding nothing.

Bisttram, like many of his contemporaries, was not satisfied with what little the Pueblo offered visitors, and searched elsewhere for contextual information that would give him some understanding of the meaning of the ceremonies. Among the most

³⁸ Hunt, 3.

³⁹ See Esther S. Goldfrank, Foreword to *Isleta Painting*, by Elsie Clews Parsons (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1970), v-xvi.

accessible sources were guidebooks, readily available at popular tourist sites around the region. Published guides, however, were often lacking both in sophistication and in accuracy, tending toward poetic celebration of the Indians' antiquity and naturalness, with extremely limited anthropological detail.

Bisttram relied on a popular guidebook that fit this characterization: Erna Fergusson's *Dancing Gods: Indian Ceremonials of New Mexico and Arizona*, which was published just a year before he began work on his own *Dancing Gods* series. The book apparently provided Bisttram with a title in addition to information about the Pueblo rituals. It included photographic reproductions of paintings by many of the most celebrated artists working in New Mexico, several of whom were Bisttram's personal acquaintances. Fergusson's decision to use fine art illustrations by Anglo artists working in New Mexico in a volume that was intended as a serious exploration of Pueblo religion demonstrates a philosophical affinity with Bisttram; she apparently felt that the subjective nature of the paintings would actually give her readers a better understanding of the dances than more technical illustrations. In addition to ostensibly objective observations like John Sloan's *Eagle Dance*, she also included much more stylized and abstracted works by artists including Olive Rush and Frank Applegate. Fergusson described the Native Americans' dances as a profound expression of spirituality, as well as the highest artistic achievement of their culture. She justified her selection of illustrations Anglo artists working in New Mexico because they were among the few who recognized "that the Indian is essentially an artist."⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Erna Fergusson, *Dancing Gods: Indian Ceremonials of New Mexico and Arizona* (New York: Knopf, 1931) v.

Though the importance of dance in Pueblo culture was a commonplace in contemporary writing, discovering the specific meanings of the ceremonies, apart from their general function in the annual agricultural or hunting seasons, proved extremely difficult. Fergusson, for all her celebration of the “meaning in every item of costume and decoration, in every step and movement” of the Pueblo dances, expounded at length on descriptions of the dance, music, costumes, and settings, but provided relatively little to explain what exactly their meanings entailed. While she provided a richly detailed physical description of the eagle dance, she limited her explication of its significance to the acknowledgement that she was told that it was “part of a healing ceremony.”⁴¹

Perhaps in order to excuse her own lack of knowledge, she condescendingly asserted that the majority of Pueblo dancers themselves were ignorant of the meaning behind the rituals they performed: “Ask an Indian the significance of certain movements used in the dance or certain symbols which appear in costumes or decoration and he will answer you evasively... this is often because he does not wish to tell, but often it is true that he does not know.” Her primitivist view considered the Pueblo’s religious expression primarily instinctual rather than learned; only a few spiritual leaders knew the full meaning of the ceremony, she asserted, and they would not willingly divulge such sacred knowledge.⁴²

With only peripheral access to Pueblo religions and minimal useful material from the interpretive works that he consulted, Bisttram was left to construct his own interpretation of the Indians’ spirituality, based as much on his Theosophically-derived

⁴¹ Ibid., xxiv, 54.

⁴² Ibid., xv.

understanding of ancient religion as his actual observations of Pueblo people. The study of Native American cultures was important to Theosophists in at least two significant ways: Theosophists not only attempted to expand their scholarly purview and depth of religious knowledge by studying the American Indians, but they also asserted the perceived correlation between Native American religious traditions and established Theosophical doctrine as evidence of the truth of the latter. Thus, Theosophical investigations of Native American religions often carried the agenda of bolstering the claims of Theosophy, substantially limiting the objectivity of their observations.

As a result, Theosophical writers tended to focus on a few key themes, including the alleged pantheistic nature of American Indian religion, their freedom from restrictive religious systems and morals, and their belief in a cyclical series of worlds, all of which, they asserted, correlated closely with Theosophical ideas advanced by Blavatsky and gleaned from cultures around the world and throughout history. In the process, crucial aspects of individual Native American religious systems were overlooked or deemed unimportant.

Bisstram's images of Native Americans reflect numerous conceptions of Native American cultures promoted by Theosophical writers. On a fundamental level, Bisstram accorded with most contemporary Theosophists by neglecting the tremendous diversity among Native American peoples across the continents, imagining a generalized monolithic "Indian" culture with essentially one religion. This conception was widespread at the time, and was given serious academic credence by leading

anthropologists, including Bisttram's close associate, Edgar Hewett.⁴³ Accordingly, Bisttram seldom acknowledged any difference between the various Pueblos, each of which regard themselves as unique peoples, demarcated by significant cultural and linguistic differences. This attitude is evident in Bisttram's consistent use of the term "Indians" to describe all the indigenous peoples of the Southwest. Likewise, the contemporary criticism of Bisttram's work seldom even used the term "Pueblo" to suggest that the people he painted belonged to a more specific culture than simply "Indians."⁴⁴

Another aspect of Native American culture that was emphasized in Theosophical writing, originating with Blavatsky, was the conception that American Indians were actually among the most ancient races. As I describe in chapter two, Blavatsky claimed that Native Americans were remnants of the fourth root race, the previous inhabitants of the earth in a cyclical evolutionary progression. According to Blavatsky, the residents of Atlantis were nearly annihilated when their continent sank into the sea after they abused their advanced occult powers.⁴⁵ Thus, Theosophical writers cast Native Americans as the almost-uniquely ancient remnants of a culture with exceptional spiritual capabilities.

Bisttram also would have recognized the alleged link between Native Americans and Atlanteans as a key element in Roerich's portrayal of the Pueblo Indians. Roerich, who had traveled throughout Asia in his search for ancient wisdom, claimed authority

⁴³ See chapter one for Hewett's views on the original unity of all Native American groups.

⁴⁴ Hewett, *Ancient Life in the American Southwest*, 22-23; Hewett, "Art and Culture in Ancient America," *Santa Fe New Mexican*, n.d., Emil Bisttram Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁴⁵ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine* 2:424-428.

on the subject when he immediately recognized the Southwest Indians as close relatives of the Mongolians. As he described:

In 1921, when I became acquainted with the Red Indian Pueblos of New Mexico and Arizona, I was forced to exclaim repeatedly: "But those are real Mongols!" Their features, details of their dress, their way of riding, and the character of some of their songs, all carried me away in imagination across the ocean... Something inexplicable, fundamental, beyond all superficial theories, unites these two nations.⁴⁶

As Roerich claimed, the only explanation for the similarity between the two cultures, separated by a vast ocean, was that they had a common origin in the ancient continent of Atlantis. This conception was shared by multiple contemporaries of Bisttram in Taos; Frank Waters referred frequently in his *Book of the Hopi* to similarities he perceived between Buddhist and Hopi religions, emphasizing his sense of the common origins of all ancient traditions.⁴⁷ Blanche Grant's work, *Taos Indians*, 1925, which Bisttram had read, actually argues that the name "Taos" was a derivation of the Chinese word "Tao," evidence of ancient interaction between the two cultures.⁴⁸

Bisttram's Vanishing Indians

Despite Blavatsky's celebration of "ancient" cultures for their advanced religious knowledge, her conception of a progressive series of root races followed the schema proposed by cultural evolutionists to argue that the Native Americans were less evolved than Western cultures. While this position was intended to signal their spiritual superiority, their culture having antedated Western materialist thought, it also implied that the American Indians were behind in the evolutionary cycle of root races, and had

⁴⁶ Nicholas Roerich, *Heart of Asia* (New York: Roerich Museum Press, 1930), 49.

⁴⁷ Frank Waters, *Book of the Hopi* (New York: Viking, 1963).

⁴⁸ Blanche Grant, *Taos Indians* (Glorieta, NM: Rio Grande Press, 1925), 14.

not experienced the physical side of the evolutionary “arc.” From the perspective of contemporary Theosophy, although the Native Americans’ religious systems were of inestimable value, their scientific knowledge was inadequate to allow them full participation in the “synthesis of science, religion, and philosophy” that formed the central impetus of the Theosophical project.

Furthermore, Theosophical writers agreed with the predominant contemporary view that the American Indians were doomed to vanish in a relatively short period of time. Even sympathetic observers contemporary with Bistram continued to believe that Indian cultures could not survive the ongoing modernization of the Southwest.

Numerous works that Bistram read emphasized the importance of conducting fieldwork immediately, before the Pueblo people abandoned their traditions. Edgar Hewett wrote of Pueblo society, “Its destiny must be realized in connection with the aggressive and efficient race that broke into its continental isolation four centuries ago, and speedily made a pathetic wreck of its patiently evolved civilization. The best we can do is to save what we can of that priceless heritage and make every effort to comprehend it...”⁴⁹

Erna Fergusson believed that the Pueblos’ understanding of their dances’ religious significance was already starting to fade. “In time, as Indians are weaned from their ancient faiths, it is likely that all their ceremonies will lose meaning in the same way,” she wrote, “and it is important that interested white people should help them to preserve their dances as an art form when they no longer serve as a religious form.”⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Hewett, *Ancient Life in the American Southwest*, 27.

⁵⁰ Fergusson, xxiii.

As I note in chapter two, Blavatsky taught that the emergence of Theosophy marked the beginnings of a new, sixth root race. As the sixth root race advanced, the current fifth root race would diminish. Remnants of the fourth root race in Theosophical thought, the Native Americans were a step behind the evolutionary cycle. Their continuance was already deemed tenuous, and the signs marking the arrival of a new root race only seemed to further evince their immanent disappearance through acculturation. Blavatsky asserted that “in character and external type the elder [root race] loses its characteristics, and assumes the new features of the younger race,” diminishing the previous root race until it vanishes entirely.⁵¹ Thus, Theosophy provided both the impetus for learning from and preserving Native American culture, but also a religious explanation for the inevitability of their decline.

Bisttram was far from unique in portraying American Indians as vanishing; this was a prominent theme in contemporary art. Shannon Egan detailed how numerous artists’ projects of recording aspects of native traditions were explicitly undertaken in an attempt to preserve cultural knowledge before it was lost—she traced this conception in the photography of Edward S. Curtis.⁵² Wanda Corn described artists’ use of skulls as motifs in paintings of Indians as expressing the idea that, like the Buffalo, they would soon be extinct.⁵³

But Bisttram had the added weight of Theosophical speculation to support his view that the Indians were destined to disappear. Many of his associates were also

⁵¹ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine*, 2:444.

⁵² Shannon Egan, ““Yet in a Primitive Condition:” Edward S. Curtis’s *North American Indian*,” *American Art* 20, no. 3 (Fall, 2006): 59-61.

⁵³ Corn, 273-276.

convinced that the world was at the cusp of a tremendous change, and anticipated the imminent arrival of a “New Age.” Rudhyar wrote extensively on the evolution of culture and the destiny of humanity. Accepting Blavatsky’s claim that the world had already begun evolving into its next iteration, he asserted that the impulse toward primitivism, as it was commonly expressed, was an unhealthy attempt to shirk responsibility for advancing the condition of humanity. “The only form of salvation which a new generation of city-dwellers and suburban commuters can envision,” he wrote, “is a chaotic return to the ‘natural’ life and a glorified sexual freedom which is essentially not free, because it is an escape from emotional conflicts... we have to go ahead, not backward.”⁵⁴ While Rudhyar advocated learning from cultures that he considered “pre-civilized,” and made frequent use of ostensibly Native American perspectives in his own work, he insisted that the path to forward evolution lay in synthesizing the best aspects of past and present cultures into a new society.

Rudhyar and Bistram agreed that artists were responsible for promoting the progressive evolution of the world. Rudhyar felt that artists, typified by Picasso, who used shocking artistic elements from “primitive” cultures in order to effect the “disintegration of [their] culture,” were making insufficient progress. “At a higher level,” he wrote, “the challenge to the past comes also from geniuses who, intuitively sensing the need for a new type of culture, introduce a new approach to the old forms, extending their boundaries until these explode and release what they contained for a vaster, more significant type of integration.”⁵⁵ As Rudhyar argued, the key to effecting

⁵⁴ Dane Rudhyar, *Culture, Crisis, and Creativity*, 36-37.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

change through art lay in synthesizing ancient and modern forms into a new mode that combined the power inherent in both, transcending all prior creativity.

Rudhyar's model reflects Kandinsky's conception of the ideal role of the artist in society. In *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky allegorized the "life of the spirit" in any civilization as a triangle with a broad base extending upward to a miniscule tip. While the bulk of society occupied the lower realms, visionaries at the top drove the point of the triangle ever upward, slowly bringing the rest of humanity up behind them: "what to-day can be understood only by the apex and to the rest of the triangle is an incomprehensible gibberish, forms tomorrow the true thought and feeling of the second segment," he wrote. Kandinsky's conception of cultural evolution was itself heavily influenced by Theosophy; he went on to quote Blavatsky in asserting that "the earth will be a heaven in the twenty-first century in comparison with what it is now..."⁵⁶ Bistram agreed with Kandinsky that the genuinely innovative artist was one of the few who could advance the situation of humanity. And, in Bistram's view, they would do so by becoming "the synthesizer of the reality of religion and the truth of science" as they gleaned the richest fruits of religious, scientific, and artistic knowledge from cultures past and present around the world.

Finding Metaphysical Meaning in Native American Ceremonial Dance

Bistram's paintings of Native American subjects were an attempt to synthesize the religious and artistic views of the Puebloans with his own perspectives drawn from Theosophy and theorists of modernist art, including Kandinsky and Rudhyar. By integrating specific symbolic elements from the Indian ceremonial dances within a

⁵⁶ Kandinsky, 14, 29.

combinative metaphysical iconography, Bisttram believed that his work captured the meaning of the ritual, and synthesized it in a novel expression of religious meaning. *Eagle Dance*, for example, evinces multiple characterizations of Native American cultures derived from Theosophical literature. Most prominently, Bisttram's spiraling composition relates the dance to his conception of the shared understanding between Pueblo and metaphysical religions of the cyclical nature of the universe.

Rather than portraying the entire dance, which typically includes multiple dancers arranged in a line, as in Tsireh's depiction, Bisttram chose to emphasize the pivoting and turning motions of the individual dancers, meant to evoke the soaring flight of the eagle. Bisttram arranged the figures in a closed circular space so that they seem to rotate around the painting. The dancers' feet, wings, and plume-tipped masks radiate from the center of the painting, resembling spokes in a wheel, and creating an almost dizzying sense of spiraling motion. Bisttram further emphasized this circular movement by circumscribing the image within a clearly outlined ellipse, eliminating any other background or spatial context.

The circularity of *Eagle Dance* evokes the cyclical nature of the annual Pueblo ceremonies. Many of the Pueblo ceremonial dances were performed according to a precisely structured calendar, enacted at specific dates every year to ensure the proper progression of the seasonal and weather processes, and with them, agricultural success.⁵⁷ As Bisttram's contemporary, Frank Waters, wrote of the Hopi ceremonies, "They wheel slowly and majestically through the seasonal cycles, like the constellations

⁵⁷ Hill, 4-7.

which time their courses and imbue their patters with meaning... follow[ing] the inexorable laws of universal life itself.”⁵⁸

Cyclical repetition following “the inexorable laws of universal life,” as Waters recognized, was also an integral facet of Theosophical thought. Theosophists recognized that nearly every aspect of the observable world, from the recurrence of the seasons to the rotation of the Earth around the sun, repeat on a mathematically predictable basis. They extended this pattern of calculable repetition to the universe beyond physical observation, asserting that the world and its inhabitants move through predictable cycles of existence, supporting Blavatsky’s cosmology of universal evolution. Theosophists who studied Native American cultures heavily emphasized this purported similarity between the systems of belief. Dane Rudhyar, for example, discoursed at length on the evolution of the world through cyclical states of being, advancing the American Indians’ alleged belief that humanity now inhabits the “fourth world” as evidence of correspondence between ancient and modern esoteric wisdom.⁵⁹ Others were even more direct in their Theosophical interpretations of Native American religions; as Blair Moffett wrote in “The Theosophy of Ancient America,” after summarizing the work of earlier Theosophists on Native American cultures, “The Indians' recitals converge remarkably with the modern theosophical perspective of man's development.”⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Waters, 125.

⁵⁹ Rudhyar, *Culture, Crisis, and Creativity*, 28.

⁶⁰ Blair A. Moffett, “The Theosophy of the Ancient Americas,” *Sunrise* (Jan. 1975).

Bisttram's engagement with this discourse is evident throughout his oeuvre, as exemplified in his drawing, *Time Cycle*, 1940 (fig. 16). Its complex, three-dimensional mathematical precision suggests exceptional rationality and fixity in the progress of time, while the repetition of shapes evokes the Theosophical concept of the multiplicity of states of being. The chains of geometrical figures that expand from single points and then radiate outward accord with the Theosophical understanding of the infinite nature of spiritual progression. Bisttram made similar use of shifting but infinitely repeating geometrical shapes in his depiction of the eagle dancers. As they gyrate endlessly around the central axis, Bisttram's dancers are meant to enact not only the Pueblo belief in the cyclicity of nature, but the broader Theosophical view of a cyclical universe.

Bisttram further emphasized his esoteric understanding of the eagle dance by painting it within a religious emblem of great personal importance. Forming the background in *Eagle Dance* is a pale ellipse, shaded to appear strikingly voluminous against the flattened forms of the dancers themselves. He called this symbol the "cosmic egg," and noted that "from ancient times the Mysteries likened the universe to an egg."⁶¹ On a basic level, the egg's connotations of generative capacity made it a fitting symbol for the meaning Bisttram saw in the performance. As Ferguson argued, all dances were fundamentally about fertility; whether they were meant to encourage the growth of crops, human procreation, or the fecundity of the Earth in general, every dance was performed as an appeal to the "life-giving principle."⁶² Edgar Hewett had explained the Eagle Dance specifically as a fertility ritual, describing the dancers'

⁶¹ See Bisttram, "Picture Interpretation Three," Emil Bisttram Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [2893:185].

⁶² Ferguson, xiv.

moves as “mating gestures.”⁶³ On another level, however, the egg carried even further significance, as it was employed by Theosophical writers to symbolize not only physical fertility, but generation on a cosmic level. As Blavatsky wrote, the egg was “the symbol of life in *immortality* and eternity; as also the glyph of the generative matrix; and the *tau*, associated with it, only of life and birth in *generation*.”⁶⁴ Blavatsky and numerous subsequent writers expounded on the significance of germination or the hatching of an egg as a metaphor for the creation of the universe.

Other works by Bisttram help elucidate the symbols he employed in *Eagle Dance*. In 1938-39, he produced a group of drawings called the *Cosmic Egg Series*, which were, in his description, “symbolic ideographs, interpreting the soul’s desire for union with its source or First Cause.” He later worked his drawing *At-One-Ment*, from this series, into an oil painting, *Atonement*, 1965 (fig. 17). The painting depicts a radiant white egg descending from its counterpart on the celestial plane down to the Earth below, apparently illustrating the third stanza of Dzyan quoted in *The Secret Doctrine*, “the ray shoots through the virgin egg; the ray causes the eternal egg to thrill, and drop the non-eternal germ, which condenses into the world-egg.”⁶⁵ This, as Blavatsky claimed, was the creation of our present world from the “Eternal Cause,” or, in Bisttram’s term, the “First Cause.”⁶⁶

Bisttram illustrated this cosmological event with a radiant white egg hovering in space, pierced by a triangular ray from above. The “world egg” traces its path to the

⁶³ Hewett, *Ancient Life in the American Southwest*, 128.

⁶⁴ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine*, 1:365.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:28.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:391.

surface of the Earth with a band of light that ties it to the “virgin egg” above. The Earth, a barren black void, begins to ripple with energy as the egg exudes its life-giving force. *Atonement* refers to the Theosophical conception of the eternal cycle of the creation and evolution of worlds by depicting the “virgin egg,” the source of the present world, surrounded by an aura similar to the one connecting it to the “world egg” below, extending upward into space, suggesting a previous moment of creation that brought it into being from an even more distant plane.

Bisttram’s choice of title seems puzzling given the meaning of the term “atonement” and the derivative “at-one-ment” as commonly encountered in contemporary Christian theology. This concept had been appropriated by Theosophical writers, however, and given another dimension of significance. Blavatsky was adamant that the notion of a substitutionary atonement was contrary to the natural law of evolution; no being could advance spiritually without undergoing the transformative experiences encountered in multiple lifetimes, she asserted, eliminating the possibility that one individual could do anything to save another from suffering for the consequences of their actions.⁶⁷ Several of Blavatsky’s followers, however, developed a new understanding of the Christian concept of atonement, suggesting that one individual’s suffering on behalf of another was a key moral lesson which Jesus illustrated with his own submission to crucifixion. Jesus suffered for humanity not as an act of redemption, but as a profoundly powerful lesson on the importance of selflessness.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 2:484, 505.

Annie Besant argued that “the Law of Sacrifice... lies at the root of evolution and makes it intelligible.”⁶⁸ Asserting that “all the great religions of the world have declared that the universe begins by an act of sacrifice,” she went on to explain how each of the various mechanisms of spiritual and physical evolution depend on the death of earlier forms in order to allow for the birth of higher ones.⁶⁹ This evolutionary process would eventually result in the ultimate enlightenment that would bring individuals into a full knowledge of their connectedness with every form of matter and force throughout the universe. This process of “bringing the divine more and more into the human” Besant interpreted as the true goal of “at-one-ment.”⁷⁰ Besant’s work provides the key to understanding Bistram’s *Atonement*. The creation of the world was made possible by the death of the previous world; this sacrifice allowed for the continuing evolution of the universe as the egg in the painting drops from a higher sphere to radiate its generative force over a dark and lifeless globe. Bistram’s title refers not specifically to the atonement of Christ, but to the principle of sacrifice in general, which Theosophy understood as the primary force driving the spiritual advancement of humanity.

Bistram’s use of the cosmic egg symbol in *Eagle Dance* emphasized his conception of the nearly unparalleled antiquity of the Pueblo, portraying them as the people closest to the creation of the world, the last remnants of the fourth root race. In addition, it drew a connection between the Native American dancers, the cycles of

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 2:139-141.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 2:159.

nature that their ceremonies were meant to propitiate, and the Theosophical concept of evolution. *Eagle Dance* illuminates Bisttram's understanding of the affinity between Pueblo religion and Theosophy, as Bisttram interpreted the spiraling motion of the dancers as a reflection of Theosophy's cyclical cosmology as symbolized by the egg.

Religious Art of the New Age

Bisttram, like the other members of the Transcendental Painting Group, felt that the most important role of art was to convey spiritual meaning; he further believed that modern artists were charged with creating a new form of art that could adequately capture the ever-enlarging expanse of religious understanding arising through the developments of metaphysical religion. Though Bisttram was interested in the art of the past, he was primarily concerned with the new age that he felt was just beginning to dawn. He recorded a number of ideas about the changes he anticipated in art in a manuscript called "Dynamic Symmetry," which he hoped to have published as a manual for students. An extended metaphysical interpretation of Hambidge's theory, Bisttram's work was left unfinished at his death, and is preserved in the Bisttram Papers at the Archives of American Art.

In the foreword, Bisttram explained his general understanding of the "evolutionary cycles of nations and cultures." As he wrote, "Much has been said about the 'New Age' ... A new cycle in Man's evolution, the release of his creative thinking was and is abundantly evident."⁷¹ Bisttram characterized the new age in terms drawn directly from metaphysical literature—the entry of the sign of Aquarius into the solar

⁷¹ Emil Bisttram, "Dynamic Symmetry," unfinished book manuscript in the Emil Bisttram Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [2893:222].

cycle presaged the “pouring out the healing waters of brotherhood” in an era of peace and understanding, and at the appointed time, the literal second coming of Christ, in a new incarnation to “give out a new teaching.”⁷²

Among the most important revolutions in thought that had already begun with the advent of the new age was the recognition of the “essential oneness of all things,” a concept whose importance Bisttram noted by underlining it in the manuscript. This idea was a key component of Theosophical discourse, and was emphasized by numerous writers. Claude Bragdon wrote that the “first truth” is the “law of Unity—*oneness*; for there is one Self, one Life, which, myriad in manifestation, is yet in essence ever *one*. Atom and universe, man and the world—each is a unit, an organic and coherent whole.”⁷³ Bisttram, following Roerich, applied the concept of unity to art, as well, and believed that all arts were integrally related. At his Taos School of Fine Arts, Bisttram taught painting and drawing, and arranged for other instructors lecture on dance, music, and drama. At one point, he invited Alice Sherborn, a student of Martha Graham, to teach a course on dance.⁷⁴ Bisttram even participated in organizing a dance concert in Santa Fe in 1938, in which Linde Gayl performed a selection titled “Studies in Dynamic Symmetry.”⁷⁵ Rudhyar, who is best recognized at present as a composer, emphasized that the ideals of the Transcendental Painting Group were closely paralleled by efforts

⁷² Ibid., [2893:475].

⁷³ Claude Bragdon, *The Beautiful Necessity* (New York: Knopf, 1922), 30.

⁷⁴ Arrell Morgan Gibson, *The Santa Fe and Taos Colonies: Age of the Muses, 1900-1942* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983), 66.

⁷⁵ “Linde Gayl’s Hands Completely Expressive,” *New Mexico Daily Examiner*, 16 Dec. 1938. The article notes that Raymond Jonson orchestrated the lighting for the performance.

among others working in diverse art forms, including music and dance, to create new forms of expression for the dawning new age.⁷⁶

In Bisttram's estimation, the Pueblos' incorporation of multiple forms of art into their ceremonial dances exemplified the ideal expression of unified arts. As Hewett asserted, the ceremonies were the "basic art" of the Pueblo people, as they required the labor of every type of artist, including dancers, painters, musicians, and weavers.⁷⁷ He wrote, "Religion, art, social structure, industries—all coalesce in daily life." Indian religion, he argued, "finds expression in dramatic ceremonial with musical accompaniment; in symbolism which dominates the performance of his drama dances, in color and design in his decorative arts, in the construction and use of his sanctuaries, in the order of his social life, and in his most commonplace daily tasks."⁷⁸ Fergusson lauded their incorporation of all these forms of art in the performance of the dances, which she felt demonstrated their lack of boundaries between everyday life, religion, and art.⁷⁹ Her celebration of their integrated lifestyle mirrors Bisttram's ideal for the creative artist of the "new age" whose art would "bare the totality of his life's experience."⁸⁰

⁷⁶ See Dane Rudhyar, "The Birth of the Transcendental Movement and its Manifestations in Music and the Modern Dance," *New Mexico Daily Examiner*, Aug. 21, 1938, Rudhyar argued that composers needed to break away from the conventions of classical music and abandon the standard modes and tonalities of Western music.

⁷⁷ Hewett, "Art and Culture in Ancient America."

⁷⁸ Hewett, *Ancient Life in the American Southwest*, 52.

⁷⁹ Fergusson, xxiii-xxv.

⁸⁰ Quoted in Rogers, "Taos Artists Speak their Mind."

This understanding of the Native Americans' synthesis of art and life depended upon the conception that they maintained a "tribal" mindset in which individuality was subsumed in a communal way of life. As Rudhyar wrote, "In archaic societies at the tribal and communal stages of development the collective overwhelms the individual factor. In fact the individual part of a man's being and behavior is merely a hesitant and most restricted embroidery on the warp and woof of collective living."⁸¹ Mabel Dodge Luhan expressed a similar view, asserting that an individual's complete integration into the Pueblo community was vastly more fulfilling than the life allowed by the Western atomized psyche. Of her first experience at Taos Pueblo, she wrote, "all of a sudden I was brought up against the Tribe, where a different instinct ruled, where a different knowledge gave a different power from any I had known, and where virtue lay in wholeness instead of dismemberment."⁸² Luhan saw the social structure of the Pueblo as a model for a new, revitalized civilization, positing their perceived "wholeness" as an antidote to the isolation of individuals in the modern West. She claimed, by comparison, that "the race to which I belong is disintegrating with ever-increasing momentum."⁸³

Theosophists recognized the Native Americans' alleged collective form of identity as both a mark of their ancient origins, and a sign of humanity's future potential. In the Atlantean era, people had developed such strongly interdependent social relations that they were able to communicate by "thought-transference," or

⁸¹ Rudhyar, *The Transcendental Movement in Painting*, 31.

⁸² Luhan, *Edge of Taos Desert*, 62-63.

⁸³ Quoted in Gibson, 222.

telepathy. Atlanteans, Theosophists claimed, were able to directly access the universal realm of the subconscious, using psychical powers that were latent but inaccessible in people of the later root races.⁸⁴

Roerich wrote that the Atlanteans were “so closely in tune with nature’s consciousness that they created forms and images which they were able to endow with mortal significance.” They were so advanced spiritually that they were able to cross the line separating thought and physical reality, and use their mental powers to “tap the forces of nature.” It was the abuse of this principle, Roerich argued, that brought about the downfall of their civilization.⁸⁵ This conception influenced contemporary perspectives about the Pueblo peoples. Viewers attuned to this metaphysical discourse, including Luhan and Bisttram, understood their integrated, communal society as a remnant of the Atlantean civilization, an expression of their unique spiritual connection to each other and to the natural forces they addressed in their ceremonial dances.

Bisttram conceptualized the idea of complete interconnectivity in many of his depictions of the Pueblo dances. In *Domingo Chorus*, 1936 (fig. 18), for example, he portrayed the musicians as an intermeshed mass of forms from which the viewer cannot isolate any individual figure. The flat gouache washes give the painting a strongly two-dimensional feel, a sense that Bisttram heightened in his depiction of the musicians’ clothing as if it was composed of actual cut-out pieces of fabric. All of the figures seem to overlap and visually dissolve within the quilt-like composition, to the point that it is impossible to tell which leg belongs with which face. In fact, the group seems to

⁸⁴ See Eduard Herrmann, “Popular Theosophy,” *Word* 24, no. 4 (Jan., 1917): 246-248.

⁸⁵ Nicholas Roerich, *The Lord God of Truth Within* (Los Angeles: Phoenix, 1941), 10.

contain six heads and fourteen hands, all connected as if it were a single undifferentiated entity.

Domingo Chorus conveys Bisttram's understanding of the Pueblos' tribal society, in which the individual was completely integrated into the larger society. He understood this as a higher level of experience in which "universal" symbols were valued above personal expression. And, as Rudhyar claimed, this kind of social order was completely natural, as it arose from the Native Americans' intimate unification with the forces of nature. "The type of order prevailing in tribal communities," he wrote, "is what I shall call organic order. It is the order of life: biospheric order, biopsychic, and cultural order. It is rooted in the past, manifesting in organic growth, maturity, and decay: a cyclic type of order."⁸⁶ The key themes that Rudhyar postulated as part of the "tribal" society—organic order, antiquity, and cyclicity—became central concerns for Bisttram as he formulated his theory of an ideal religious aesthetic.

Natural Symbolism

In developing his concept of the relationship between art and religion, Bisttram looked to art of the distant past as an example of the art that would characterize the new age. This was the main justification that Bisttram forwarded for his promotion of dynamic symmetry. As he wrote, "Ancient cultures understood and use the Laws and Principles evident in Nature, the mathematical and geometrical relationships: proportion, order and harmony. These were not only philosophical concepts but realistic conclusions applied to practical solutions of creative problems."⁸⁷ For

⁸⁶ Rudhyar, *Culture, Crisis, and Creativity*, 41.

⁸⁷ Bisttram, "Dynamic Symmetry."

Bisttram, representing religious truth in painting involved creating new forms of beauty in the same manner that nature created them, adhering to the same laws. He wrote, “We must not imitate nature in her effects, we must follow her in her laws and principles, only in so doing may we hope to create works comparable to hers.”⁸⁸

Thus, one characteristic of effective religious art would be an adherence to the same anciently-known principles that dictated the compositional strategies of great artists throughout all time, which were based on an observation of the composition of natural forms. This is exactly what Bisttram believed that dynamic symmetry allowed. As Pasquine described, many of Bisttram’s depictions of ceremonial dances were composed according to the principles of dynamic symmetry—she cited the tripartite division of figures in *Hopi Indian Snake Dance* (fig. 11) as a specific example.⁸⁹

Bisttram was not alone in associating Native American art with dynamic symmetry; Nena de Brennecke wrote that ancient Greeks, American Indians, and modernist artists were all connected by their use of the system.⁹⁰ As Erika Doss noted, other contemporary artists in the Southwest used Hambidge’s system in portrayals of Native American subjects—she cited *Earth Knower*, 1931 (fig. 19) as an example.⁹¹

A later work by Bisttram, *Taos Pueblo*, c. 1969 (fig. 20), emblemizes Bisttram’s understanding of ancient cultures’ adherence to geometrical systems of

⁸⁸ Quoted in “Exhibit Interpreted by Artist, Wife and Pupil,” *Tulsa Daily World*, June 7, 1936. Emil Bisttram Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁸⁹ Pasquine “The Politics of Redemption,” 365.

⁹⁰ Nena de Brennecke, “Metalwork Designed from the Motifs of the American Indian,” *American Architect* 138, no. 2590 (Dec., 1930): 102.

⁹¹ Erika Doss, “Between Modernity and ‘The Real Thing’: Maynard Dixon’s Mural for the Bureau of Indian Affairs,” *American Art* 18, no. 3 (Autumn, 2004): 25. See chapter four for a more extensive discussion of *Earth Knower* in relation to Jonson’s conception of religious aesthetics.

proportion. At the ground level, *Taos Pueblo* seems relatively representational, if composed with a somewhat exaggerated geometrical regularity. The darker spaces clearly represent shaded walls and openings for windows and doors—two rounded *hornos*, large earthen ovens in front of the building, are modeled to appear three dimensional. As he worked up the canvas, however, Bisttram provided ever fewer special clues, so that from approximately the midpoint to the top, the rectangular patches of color no longer seem to represent walls, but resemble the artist's geometrical abstractions. Indeed, a viewer who saw only the upper half would be hard pressed to recognize the subject of the painting.

As *Taos Pueblo* suggests, Bisttram associated the architecture of the Pueblo with natural ideals of harmonic composition. This was a common theme in early twentieth century descriptions of Southwest Indian building styles. A critic in *El Palacio* noted that the Pueblo structure was “the only American architecture in this country, because it has virtually grown out of the soil, shaped by the environment and is based upon natural development going back centuries.”⁹² As Arrell Morgan Gibson described, the building material was supposedly “imbued with a metaphysical essence for the spiritually motivated, non-materialistic Indians – it symbolized earth the mother, with the sun the source of life; thus, residing in an adobe dwelling, one abided in the comforting maternal embrace.” In addition, the lifecycle of adobe structures mirrored the cyclical progression of nature. Gibson continued, “adobe symbolized the irrefutable progression

⁹² Quoted in Gibson 45.

of life – born from the earth mother, sustained by her during life, and returning to her at death.”⁹³

In addition to his belief in the importance of natural systems of composition, Bisttram asserted that a painting needed to be well balanced between figuration and abstraction. As an active proponent of modernism in Taos, Bisttram argued that academic realism was too concerned with “imitating nature in her effects,” and asserted that modern art was powerful in novel ways by opening up “new vistas.”⁹⁴ Bisttram felt that abstract art had the potential to be more expressive than illusionistic representation, as the artist could imbue the work with some sense of the emotional import that he or she brought to the creative process. He asserted that “The artist who is developing, working with mind as well as emotion, is always painting in the next cycle... It is the destiny of every true artist to give to the world a new vision, to lead it into new experiences...”⁹⁵ This ideal fits well with Kandinsky’s conception of artists as the leading point on the rising pyramid of advancing culture.

Nonetheless, Bisttram felt that completely non-objective art risked being meaningless, as the complete disavowal of any symbolic language would render a painting mute. In a chart outlining “Cycles of Taste” from Bisttram’s teaching notes preserved at the Harwood Museum in Taos, he designated five distinct modes of art that corresponded to historical tastes, roughly based on a schema that his associate, Leo

⁹³ Ibid., 89.

⁹⁴ Quoted in “Exhibit Interpreted by Artist, Wife and Pupil.”

⁹⁵ Ibid.

Katz proposed in *Understanding Modern Art*, 1936.⁹⁶ The first, which he called the “Geometric Period,” he associated with Egyptian, Archaic Greek, and primitive art. Under the heading, he listed the following characteristics: “universal, cosmic, static, inactive, eternal, permanent, nonchanging, infinite, impersonal, symbolic.” The second state, the “Classical Period,” which described “Later Greek” art, was the “study of the external, study of things as they are,” and the “beginning of decadence.” In the third and fourth states, “Impression” and “Self-Expressionistic,” art focused progressively more on individual artists’ ideas, and concerned itself less with broader cultural expression. The fourth stage, Bistram wrote, was both the “Most personal” and the “lowest period in Art – furthest away from the Universal.” In the fifth and final stage, “A return to Geometry,” the cycle began again with “A search for a Universal language.”⁹⁷

Bistram’s understanding of the cyclical nature of art was closely related to the Theosophical conception of the evolutionary progression of the world through set series of eras. His cycle, however, was contained within the space of one individual root race, and corresponds with Theosophical writers’ descriptions of the path taken by the present, fifth root race—his terminology characterizing the various periods fits such accounts remarkably well. As Blavatsky described, from the origins of the fifth root race at the end of the Atlantean period, when “universal, cosmic, and eternal” ideas were still evident in art and religion, humanity gradually moved through the declining

⁹⁶ Pasquine noted the connection to Katz’s work in “The Politics of Redemption,” 87. See Leo Katz, *Understanding Modern Art*, Chicago: Delphian Society, 1936. This volume was printed by the same organization that exhibited Bistram’s *Dancing Gods* series in 1933.

⁹⁷ Emil Bistram, “Cycles of Taste,” Emil Bistram Papers, Harwood Museum of Art.

spirituality of the historical era, up to the present, “lowest period” when materialist philosophy took humanity “furthest from the universal.”

Bisttram’s schematic view of the “Cycles of Taste” directly evinces Rudhyar’s influence. Rudhyar had postulated a dichotomy between “Archaic” and “Classical” art, describing each in terms similar to Bisttram’s. Archaic art, corresponding with Bisttram’s category, “Geometrical,” was concerned with “universal” symbolism, and reflected what Rudhyar called “the ‘race-Soul,’ or, in Jungian terminology, the Collective Unconscious.”⁹⁸ In Rudhyar’s view, Archaic art, as a form of collective cultural expression, necessarily progressed as cultures developed and evolved. Classical art, however, was based on the “basic desire for the ‘profane’ and temporary enjoyment of forms,” equivalent to Bisttram’s description of the Classical period as “decadent.” Rudhyar positioned any art that focused solely on the artist’s own personal expression, or was made simply to conform to a particular aesthetic standard, within the category of “Classical,” and like Bisttram, he asserted that truly significant art would follow the pattern of the Archaic period.⁹⁹

Bisttram’s work also suggests the influence of Oswald Spengler’s *Decline of the West*, which he included on a reading list for students in his teaching notebook from 1930.¹⁰⁰ In Spengler’s view of the cyclical rise and fall of the world’s civilizations, which he compared with the yearly seasons, the West had already entered its “winter” period. Spengler reached this conclusion through comparison with other historical

⁹⁸ Rudhyar, *The Transcendental Movement in Painting*, 32.

⁹⁹ Rudhyar, *Culture, Crisis, and Creativity*, 81.

¹⁰⁰ As noted in Bisttram’s teaching notebook, Emil Bisttram Papers, Harwood Foundation; Pasquine reprinted the list with publication information for contemporary editions of all the works Bisttram listed in “The Politics of Redemption,” 519-522.

civilizations, and mapped out an elaborate schematic showing how various aspects that he felt defined contemporary Western culture evinced its immanent decline.¹⁰¹ The advent of materialist philosophy, had, in Spengler's view, presaged an art style that was devoid of any meaning, and signified nothing more than its formal adherence to a particular passing fashion. He felt that Impressionism exemplified meaningless modern art, as its quasi-scientific attempt to capture the experience of viewing nature mirrored the materialist scientists' move to deprive the cosmos of any hint of numinous feeling. He wrote that the author of this "dying art" is "a workman, not a creator... The world-feeling that underlies it is so thoroughly irreligious, so worthless for any but a 'religion of reason' so called that every one of its efforts in that direction... strikes us as hollow and false."¹⁰²

In Bisttram's religiously inflected interpretation of Spengler, however, the winter of Western civilization marked the imminent arrival of the spring of a new age. Rudhyar criticized Spengler's work, arguing that he failed to recognize that the decline of one civilization allowed another the chance to develop through the same roots. "The leveling and equalizing process," he wrote, "...is only the beginning of an evolution."¹⁰³ Bisttram adhered to Blavatsky and her successors' characterization of the next evolutionary stage as a time when advances in both science and art would usher in a dramatic return of meaning in all realms of culture. He held that Theosophy's religious reinterpretation of materialistic science would encourage a new, sacred world-view.

¹⁰¹ See Oswald Spengler, *Decline of the West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), esp. Appendix I, "Tables Illustrating the Comparative Morphology of History."

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 154.

¹⁰³ Quoted in Ertan, 19.

Likewise, he believed that artists would return their focus to meaning, rather than style. In doing so, they would reach beyond the bounds of their own personal expressivity, and, as he wrote, begin to “search for a Universal language.”¹⁰⁴

Bisttram posited that the start of the new period of art, the “return to Geometry,” involved revitalizing principles from the first period, which included the art of “primitives.” The new art would, like his own, appropriate meaning from ancient cultures in a synthetic and progressive style. Bisttram’s belief that a “return to Geometry” was a fundamental concern of the art of the new age informed his aesthetic theory. He felt that spiritually significant art was necessarily symbolic, in order to convey a message that was broad enough to be applicable to the entire root race, while clear enough to be meaningful to an individual person. Thus, Bisttram avoided completely non-objective work, as he associated complete abstraction with “style” devoid of significance. “Pure Design,” he wrote, “is an end in itself, done for its own sake, has no external use, aesthetic only.”¹⁰⁵ Even the most advanced abstract art, by this formula, would be limited to the fourth stage in cycle, the “lowest” and “furthest away from the Universal.”

In this respect, Bisttram’s advocacy of a “return to Geometry” seems problematic, as his paintings of geometric forms seem totally non-objective and potentially without meaning. While the titles of some works suggest avenues of interpretation, as in *Atonement*, others seem only to refer to aspects of the composition, as in *Suspension*, 1936 (fig. 21). Bisttram, however, understood that geometry itself

¹⁰⁴ Bisttram, “Cycles of Taste.”

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

was an overarching meta-symbol, signifying the order and process that he believed characterized the universe. Rudhyar expressed a similar view when he wrote that abstract artists utilize

...an autonomous activity of the normally unconscious abstract mind in terms of geometrical symbolism... Whether our conscious mind knows it or not, geometrical forms are the language of expression of our innermost being at the unconscious abstract level; the level at which Archetypes or principles of psycho-mental and cosmic organization operates—a purely transcendental level.¹⁰⁶

Rudhyar's language reflects Kandinsky's assertion that abstract colors and forms could elicit emotional responses on a subconscious level. As Kandinsky wrote, "form-harmony must rest on a corresponding vibration of the human soul."¹⁰⁷ Following Kandinsky and Rudhyar, Bistram held that non-objective art could be meaningful as long as it incorporated the geometrical principles underlying the composition of nature itself. A painting with no subject apart from the natural beauty of geometry testified to the harmonious and orderly state of nature, and thus became a symbol of remarkable religious significance.

Furthermore, this type of symbolism was allegedly universally accessible, as it required no knowledge of any particular symbolic language, but was apprehended subconsciously. Bistram believed that abstract paintings were uniquely powerful in their ability to signify across cultural and linguistic barriers, as any viewer could feel internally the message of cosmic order that a successful geometric composition conveyed. His art, he wrote, was an attempt to achieve a "greater, a more significant reality by stripping the external aspect of form to the barest bone, even de-materializing

¹⁰⁶ Rudhyar, *The Transcendental Movement in Painting*, 40.

¹⁰⁷ Kandinsky, 57.

it.”¹⁰⁸ By creating images that signified on a level beyond the ordinary experience of visual reality, Bisttram believed that he was producing truly transcendental painting.

So, for Bisttram, meaningful art was necessarily symbolic, whether the symbolism arose from specific indexical or iconic representational elements, or was conveyed by the overall composition, reflecting the ideals of natural harmony through the formal elements of the work. As he wrote, “the modern artist does not copy life, but tries to create a symbol of it—in a particular picture to achieve something that, as well as being particular, has the quality and truth of universality about it.”¹⁰⁹ The quality of particularity came through the use of specific interpretable symbols, whereas universality arose through a broader alignment with the creative potential in nature, the subconsciously apprehended symbolism of geometric forms as archetypes of “cosmic organization,” in Rudhyar’s terminology. The most powerful art, Bisttram held, was at once particular and universal, symbolic on both levels at the same time.

Bisttram developed his specific mode of painting in an attempt to convey both types of symbolism simultaneously, but he believed that other forms of art had the same power of dual signification. Among the most effective, in his estimation, were the ceremonial dances of the Southwest Indians. The costumes, movements, and music, he held, were all laden with intensely meaningful symbols. Furthermore, every aspect of the dances was based on some form in nature, closely allied with the cosmic creative forces that Bisttram believed governed the cycles of nature. As Leo Katz wrote in the

¹⁰⁸ Emil Bisttram, “Why “Modern Art””, in *Are You Fed Up With Modern Art?* by Clarence Canning Allen. Tulsa: Rainbow Press, 1952.

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in John William Rodgers, “Explains Basis of Awards in Show this Year,” *Dallas Times Herald*, 17 Mar 1933, Emil Bisttram Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [2894:283].

guide for his *Dancing Gods* exhibition at the Delphic Galleries, “The ceremonial dances of the American Indian... are their means of keeping an intimate contact with the secret forces of nature. This communion with higher powers outside awakening the powers of the subconscious inside, accompanied by rhythmic physical movements becomes an experience of reality—a higher—a super-reality.”¹¹⁰

In Bisttram’s own representations of the Pueblo dances, he attempted to capture the same higher experience of reality. In his view, the integration of universal and particular symbols made Southwestern Indian ceremonials the ideal transcendent art. He recognized the potential that this ancient expressive form had for informing the modern art of the new age, and adopted his interpretation of the Pueblo aesthetic as model in his own religious art. By combining the supposed universal symbolism of harmonious geometry with a Theosophical iconography, Bisttram aspired to reach the same level of elevated meaning that he believed the Native Americans approached in their religious art.

Hegemonic Syncretism

Not all of Bisttram’s critics felt that he succeeded in his attempt to create a meaningful new religious art by appropriating stylistic and symbolic aspects of Native American art. A writer reviewing the first exhibition of his *Dancing Gods* series described the work as “an alien attempt to turn to artistic account the age-old traditions and symbolism of a primitive people,” and questioned, “isn’t the resemblance rather seeming than real?” Expressing a rare dissenting view, the critic argued that modernist

¹¹⁰ Leo Katz, *The Dancing Gods Series: Watercolors of Indians of the Southwest*. New York: Delphic Studios, 1933.

art, despite its claims to meaning, was too open to personal interpretation to resemble actual Native American art in any meaningful way, as “the Indian... deals largely with centuries-old symbols that have a definite meaning for those versed in tribal lore.”¹¹¹

As the reviewer suggested, Bisttram failed to create an art with as much genuine religious significance as the Native Americans had, because his abstractions, though potentially meaningful, were based on an eclectic set of personal symbols, rather than an established and recognizable iconography. Bisttram could not attain to the level of cultural meaning that Native American art held because only a miniscule fraction of his viewers could readily interpret the symbolic meaning that he intended for his work.

Helen Cunningham, reviewing Bisttram’s work, implied that it failed a crucial test, as it was meaningless to the Indians themselves. She claimed to have overheard the following exchange inside the Museum of New Mexico: “An Indian sat looking at one of Emil Bisttram’s abstractions, a conception of two figures in dance pose. ‘What’s that?’ he asked. ‘Two Indians,’ he was told. The Indian showed his teeth in a smile, ‘Looks like a house.’”¹¹²

Historian Carrie Bramen has criticized liberal Christian advocates of religious fusion in the late nineteenth century as practicing a “hegemonic syncretism.” Although they promoted the sharing of knowledge among religious groups worldwide, their project, imprecated in the structures of Western imperialist thought, ultimately

¹¹¹ “Painter Turns to Indian Art,” unidentified newspaper clipping, c. 1933, Emil Bisttram Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [264/2894].

¹¹² Helen Cunningham, “Variety in the June Show at Art Museum,” *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 2 Jun., 1938, Raymond Jonson Archives.

promoted Christian superiority.¹¹³ Similarly, Bisttram's works celebrating Native American cultures presuppose the preeminence of Theosophy. The particular mode of primitivism that Bisttram developed was at once laudatory and denigrating of American Indians. While he celebrated the perceived spiritual purity of the Pueblo people, that alleged purity was premised on his understanding of their exceptional antiquity. Bisttram's Theosophical view of the evolution of the world acknowledged the importance of ancient wisdom, but primarily as an ingredient in the new, synthesized body of spiritual truth that marked the emergence of a new age of enlightenment.

In Bisttram's view, the Pueblo were people to learn from, not to emulate; he apparently had little interest in facilitating the expression of their own interpretation of their culture and beliefs. His appropriation of Native American styles fits Roerich's admonition to seek out the most important forms of "universal" expression:

Whether we find that expression in Russia, or in Mongolia or Arizona, it is all the expression of this great human design. This should be very close to us all because to-day we are striving toward the next evolution. We are trying to discard old forms and to create something new. But in order to strive for something new we have first to know the old. Only then can we attain the true enhancement of life.¹¹⁴

As Roerich wrote, understanding ancient forms of expression was crucial in creating the new art for the next evolutionary cycle, but, as he acknowledged, the "old forms" would be discarded in the synthetic process. Though their archaic traditions provided important lessons for modern humanity, Bisttram believed that as remnants of the fourth root race, Native American cultures would pass away as a new, sixth root race began to

¹¹³ Carrie Tirado Bramen, *The Uses of Variety: Modern Americanism and the Quest for National Distinctiveness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 276-280.

¹¹⁴ Nicholas Roerich, *Realm of Light* (New York: Roerich Museum Press, 1931), 191.

emerge, a civilization bound for unparalleled spiritual advancement as they synthesized all the world's religious traditions.

Accordingly, as Bisttram asserted, the goal of the artist must be to look ahead rather than backward, in order to participate in the advent of a new era. Unlike many of his modernist contemporaries, Bisttram's primitivism was not intent on rejecting Western culture for the ostensibly natural pre-modern life. Instead, his ambition was to advance modern culture by injecting strains of ancient wisdom and spiritual truth learned from people whose religion originated before the dawning of the present age of humanity. His images of the Indians of the Southwest synthesized those aspects of Native American cultures that Bisttram felt were most crucial with his own symbolism, derived largely from Theosophy. The result expressed Bisttram's combinative but forward-focused spirituality. His understanding of Pueblo culture provided Bisttram with an important source of religious truth, but the newly evolving culture he hoped to facilitate departed from its source and relegated actual contemporary Native Americans to the past.

Chapter Four

Indian Abstraction and “Absolute Painting” in Raymond Jonson’s Religious Aesthetic

In many respects, Raymond Jonson’s career mirrored Bisttram’s: both abandoned potential careers in commercial art in urban centers, both went to the Southwest looking for inspiration as they sought to create spiritually significant art, and both developed aesthetic theories in response to the Native American art that they encountered there. Their conceptions of ideal religious art, however, were dramatically different. Jonson felt that non-objective art could convey “a complete emotional experience” that was vastly more meaningful than an art of concrete symbolism.¹ Over the course of his career, Jonson formulated a theory of “absolute painting,” in which abstract forms communicated spiritual knowledge without the need of any intermediary symbolic language.

Despite the fact that Jonson framed his understanding of absolute painting in dialogue with metaphysical writers’ conceptions of ideal religious art, scholars have given only limited attention to the religious context surrounding his work. This is partly due to the influence of Ed Garman, Jonson’s former student and the last artist to join the Transcendental Painting Group. Twenty-three years younger than Jonson, he belonged to a younger generation of American modernists and aspired to the ideals of Clement Greenberg and other proponents of a radically formalist aesthetic. Garman addressed Jonson’s work from this perspective, interpreting his concept of absolute painting

¹ Jonson, “The Non-Objective in Painting,” talk presented to the Art Club of Albuquerque, 20 Oct., 1936. Raymond Jonson Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [9:6338].

according to Greenberg's theoretical model, and arguing that his prescient formal innovations merited recognition.

The ultimate effect of Garman's formalist interpretative strategy was to obscure the rich and multifaceted relationships to a wide range of systems of meaning which Jonson cultivated through his art. To be sure, Jonson was very devoted to the exploration of the formal possibilities inherent in the medium of painting, but the aesthetic he developed emphasized connections between elements of form and aspects of social experience. Jonson painted with the intent of conveying meaning in the most effective, most direct manner possible, whether it was meaning created anew in the painting, or distilled from sources ranging from the personal realm of subjective emotional response, to the shared cultural field of religious belief.

Scholars have addressed the significance of religion in Jonson work, but in terms that overemphasize a highly individualistic "spirituality," while overlooking the influence of particular religious systems.² Herbert Hartel's dissertation, "The Art and Life of Raymond Jonson: Concerning the Spiritual in American Abstract Art," the most extensive treatment of this subject to date, focuses on Jonson's quest to "communicate spiritual experiences and states of mind" through non-representation painting.³ Hartel adds an enormous amount of biographical detail along with copious interpretative analysis of Jonson's work, but largely accepts Garman's characterization of Jonson as not interested in any particular form of organized religion; as Hartel wrote, "Jonson maintained a faith in God and a belief in the existence of the Divine and the spiritual,

² See my discussion of this terminology in chapter one.

³ Hartel, 262.

but only in the most general and vague terms.”⁴ In fact, as Jonson’s letters, lectures, and, ultimately, his art make clear, his understanding of spirituality was structured by a specific set of religious texts and practices, with terminology that was intentionally left open to individual interpretation, but far from vague.

I construct a new account of his art practice and aesthetic ideals based on his own art and writing. In the extensive correspondence that he maintained with Bisttram, Pelton, Rudhyar, and others, as well as in the visual evidence of his paintings themselves, there is ample material to illuminate the unique and carefully considered theory that he developed as he sought to create an ideal religious art. If Jonson was reticent in his discussion of spirituality by comparison with Pelton and Bisttram, he nonetheless engaged with a similar range of religious sources, and addressed many of the same key themes in his work. Jonson’s understanding of cultural difference, his belief in the potential synthesis of ancient and modern religious systems from around the world, and his conception of the ideal form that religious art would take all coalesced around his paintings on Native American subjects.

To Jonson, the indigenous peoples of the Southwest were unique sources of spiritual wisdom, but they also represented an ideal integration of art and religion, using form freed from representation to make spiritually meaningful art. His conception of Native American art was dependent on ideas from metaphysical religious texts, works that characterized American Indians as possessing unique physical and spiritual powers derived from their intimate knowledge of natural forces. Jonson interpreted Native American art as illustrating this power, conveying meaning through direct emotional

⁴ Ibid., 25.

communication without the use of intermediary symbols, and providing a model for ideal religious art. His appropriation of formal elements from Southwest Indian sources, however, stripped design motifs of their original symbolic significance, muting the messages that the original artisans had meant to communicate.

Finding Religion, Finding Abstraction

Raymond Jonson was born in Iowa in 1891. His father was an itinerant Baptist preacher who had immigrated from Sweden around 1870, and traveled throughout the West, eventually settling in Portland, Oregon, where Raymond spent most of his youth.⁵ At about the age of eleven, Jonson felt called to accept baptism in his father's church, but by the time he was twenty, he wrote, "I realized the particular church was narrow minded, bigoted and hypocritical to such an extent I turned against it in disgust."⁶

If Jonson's impression of his father's Baptist church had changed, his conviction of the paramount importance of religion had not. Throughout his life, he sought religious truth wherever he felt he could discern it, in organized religious groups, metaphysical writings, or sources in art. He conducted his search for spiritual authenticity convinced that only he as an individual could make any ultimate judgment about the truth of any particular ideology or ontological premise, and the definition of "religion" had to be expanded in order to accommodate his understanding of the concept. As his brother recalled, "No one can know Raymond for long and not feel the

⁵ Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*, 173.

⁶ Raymond Jonson, untitled talk presented at the Chili Club, Santa Fe, 29 Aug., 1949. Raymond Jonson Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [8:6329].

impact that religion—and I use the word in its broadest meaning—has had on his character and life.”⁷

Contemporary metaphysical religious organizations were a good match for Jonson’s expanded understanding of religiosity, as well as his liberal social views.⁸ In 1910, Jonson moved to Chicago, where he studied at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts and the Art Institute of Chicago.⁹ There, he was exposed to a wide spectrum of metaphysical religions through his art instructors and through visiting artists. In 1921, the Art Institute sponsored an exhibition of paintings by Nicholas Roerich, who would go on to promote Agni Yoga later in the decade, and become a respected religious source for both Bisttram and Pelton.¹⁰

Jonson found Roerich’s work immensely appealing, and wrote that several of his paintings were “the most spiritual pieces of expression that I have ever seen. I feel here a great sympathy with my own feelings and desires.”¹¹ Roerich’s art of the period focused on allegorical images of the Himalayan region, where, as I described in chapter two, he journeyed in search of Shambhala. In *Drops of Life*, 1924 (Fig. 22), Roerich

⁷ Arthur Johnson to Ed Garman, 13 Oct., 1959, quoted in Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter* 11. Note that Raymond and Arthur spelled their last name differently; his parents, originally named Jonsson, adopted the more common English spelling after coming to the United States. Raymond legally changed his name in 1920 to reflect the Swedish pronunciation, JÖN-son. See Hartel, 19-20. Jonson was adamant about the spelling and pronunciation of his name, and used a red pencil to meticulously correct the frequent misspellings in letters that he received.

⁸ Jonson supported liberal social causes and political organizations periodically throughout his life; early in his career he was a proponent of the Progressive Party, and he voted for the Socialist candidate in the 1932 presidential election. See Hartel, 32-34.

⁹ Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter* 13.

¹⁰ Hartel, 126-127. I discuss Roerich’s relationship with Pelton in chapter two, and with Bisttram in chapter three.

¹¹ Raymond Jonson diary, 20 Apr., 1921. Raymond Jonson Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [8:6165].

portrayed a well high in the mountains as a fount of religious wisdom. The title further alludes to the “living water” that Jesus offered in John, chapter four, in a mix of religious imagery from multiple sources typical of Roerich’s synthetic art.

Jonson was able to meet Roerich personally, and Roerich, feeling that they agreed on the potential spiritual significance of art, invited him to participate in a new organization called *Cor Ardens*, Latin for “burning heart.”¹² The group was intended to promote collaboration among artists across the globe working in diverse media, and did not advance any particular style or aesthetic. A promotional leaflet proclaimed:

“Cor Ardens” recognizes art as the universal medium of expression and an evidence of life. It realizes the phenomenon that ideals in art manifest themselves simultaneously in all parts of the world and, therefore acknowledges the creative impulse irrespective of heritage.¹³

Jonson, listed as the secretary of the organization, was included amongst remarkably distinguished company for an artist just beginning his career; Roerich had used his extensive connections to secure the support of Maurice Maeterlinck, Ignacio Zuloaga, and Rabindranath Tagore, among others.¹⁴ Little ultimately came out of these illustrious connections for Jonson, however, as the group was short-lived. The young Chicago artists who made up the organization’s leadership had little means to carry out their global ambitions. The only significant activity of *Cor Ardens* was a jury-free

¹² Roerich may have borrowed the name from the title of an eponymous work by Russian Symbolist poet, Vyacheslav Ivanov. See *Cor Ardens* (Moscow: Knigoizd, 1911).

¹³ *Cor Ardens*, c. 1920, Raymond Jonson Archives.

¹⁴ Ibid. The president was Carl Hoeckner. Roerich was listed as Honorary President for Russia, Maeterlinck as the same for Belgium, Zuloaga for Spain, and Tagore for India.

exhibition at the Chicago Arts Club in 1922, which attracted relatively few artists and received scant critical attention.¹⁵

Whether or not Roerich was the first to introduce Jonson to metaphysical religion, his influence was profound in informing Jonson's conception of the potential spiritual significance of painting, a theme that he would develop throughout his career. In following decade, Jonson began formulating a theory of aesthetics that relied on the metaphysical concepts that Roerich promoted. Jonson was less willing than Pelton or Bisttram to affiliate with any particular religious group, but he read extensively from Theosophical literature, as evinced by his own art and writing. Furthermore, although he emphasized that he was not a member of any religious organization, he did actively participate in the religious culture surrounding the Transcendental Painting Group.

Jonson was particularly interested in Theosophical speculation about the possibility of mental activity on planes beyond those that were recognized by science, ideas related to the "universal consciousness" that Pelton understood as the basis of all spiritual understanding. The Axis Group, a social organization in Santa Fe, recognizing Jonson's studied interest in the subject, invited him to speak on "Psychic Phenomena" at their meeting in June, 1941. Noting that he was not an "occultist" in any official sense, he nonetheless went on to characterize Theosophy as the basis for any real understanding of consciousness extending beyond the level of the individual mind: "It seems there is a vast difference between the philosophy, ideals and methods of the true

¹⁵ Paul Kruty, "Declarations of Independents: Chicago's Alternative Art Groups of the 1920s," in *The Old Guard and the Avant-Garde: Modernism in Chicago, 1910-1940*, ed. Sue Ann Prince (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) 79.

occult as promulgated by Theosophy, which is based on Ancient Wisdom, and the isms that pertain to the psychic.”¹⁶

This same lecture also demonstrates the depth of Jonson’s study of metaphysical religion; he discoursed at length on the origins of spiritualism in the nineteenth century, outlined the history of psychical research leading right up to the present, and devoted considerable attention to Theosophy’s conception of the tripartite mind. In a clear endorsement, Jonson wrote, “Theosophy accounts for all the psychic phenomena [and] contains a complete theory of matter, particularly its functions in life with the emphasis on human life, and the spirit.”¹⁷ Even if he did not refer to himself outright as a Theosophist, he accepted the organization’s understanding of the relationship between matter and spirit, a key element in Theosophy’s challenge to scientific materialism.

Long after his initial encounters with Theosophy through Roerich and others, Jonson maintained a concerted interest in metaphysical religion. His study of Theosophy and other esoteric systems continued throughout his career in New Mexico; preserved in letters between Jonson’s wife, Vera, and Bisttram’s wife, Maryion, are accounts of evenings spent discussing such topics as “Oriental wisdom,” the relationship between humanity and divinity, and the spiritual advancements anticipated in the coming new age.¹⁸ Jonson corresponded frequently with Dane Rudhyar, and invited him to prepare an astrological chart for him and Vera in 1935—as late as 1972,

¹⁶ Jonson, “Psychic Phenomena,” talk presented at the Axis Group, Santa Fe, 17 Jun., 1941. Raymond Jonson Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [8:6294].

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ See Maryion Bisttram to Vera Jonson, 3 Dec. 3, 1946. Emil Bisttram Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Jonson asked Rudhyar for information about the Zodiac.¹⁹ More than a mere passing interest, as Garman's interpretation suggests, metaphysical religion was an important source for Jonson throughout his life; as he sought out the ideal aesthetic to convey spiritual meaning, it was the mélange of Theosophy and related systems that provided the terminology for his understanding of such fundamental concepts as the definition of "spiritual," and how it could be approached through art. Furthermore, Jonson's study of metaphysical religion would dramatically impact his understanding of diverse cultures and their religious and artistic practices, concepts that would come to the foreground in his encounter with the Native American cultures of the Southwest.

Native American Sources in Jonson's Art

Jonson's interest in Native American cultures, religions, and art has been largely overlooked in art historical scholarship. Perhaps the prevalence of such subjects in art from New Mexico has obscured its significance, but scholars have devoted only minimal attention to the artist's paintings that reference indigenous cultures of the Southwest. The most extensive treatment of this subject is Jackson Rushing's brief section on Jonson in *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde*. Rushing summarized the scope of Jonson's appropriation from American Indian design styles, and argued that his conception of non-objective painting was dependent on Native American art, as expressed in such works as *Southwest Arrangement*, 1933 (fig. 23).²⁰

¹⁹ Rudhyar complied, and concluded that the Jonsons had "a probably even more permanent spiritual relation" than their marriage. Rudhyar to Vera Jonson, 8 Feb., 1935, Raymond Jonson Archives; Jonson also apparently had a commercial motive—he concluded the letter by asking about a list of people interested in astrology who might buy color prints of some of his works. Jonson to Rudhyar, Sept., 1972, Raymond Jonson Archives.

²⁰ Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde*, 79-85.

Others who have addressed this body of work seem wary of somehow discrediting the originality of Jonson's accomplishment by suggesting that he appropriated from American Indian arts. Hartel, for example, after noting Jonson's reference to Southwest Indian art in his early abstract works, asserted, "Native American art did not facilitate Jonson's progress toward abstraction or liberate him from the representational; instead, it was one of numerous sources of inspiration that Jonson explored in his continuous efforts to achieve complete abstraction."²¹ Hartel continued by reinterpreting *Southwest Arrangement* in purely formal terms, in an apparent rebuttal of Rushing's argument. Hartel contended that American Indian visual culture was "source material," imagery and designs from which Jonson drew as he composed his abstract paintings. He wrote of *Southwest Arrangement*, "...in this painting Jonson has not taken fragmented images from Native American art of the Southwest and arranged them for the possibility of recognition or de-coding. Instead he has thoroughly absorbed the abstract imagery of Southwestern Native American art and modified it to his own, modernist sensibility."²² In accordance with his assertion that such imagery was merely a formal strategy and not subject to interpretation or "de-coding," Hartel limited his discussion of Jonson's interest in Native American cultures, arts, and religions to a brief acknowledgment of the artist's use of Indian themes in his abstractions.

Recognizing the importance of Native American themes in Jonson's work, Joseph Traugott and Tiska Blankenship curated an exhibition titled *Symbolizing New*

²¹ Hartel, 223.

²² Ibid., 224.

Mexico: Native Iconographic Influences in Raymond Jonson's Painting at the Jonson Gallery of the University of New Mexico in 1992. An accompanying gallery guide provided a succinct account of Jonson's interest in the cultures indigenous to New Mexico, chronicling his gradual shift toward abstraction. Despite the exhibition's title, the curators made little attempt to parse the iconography of any of the works, and treated the paintings as meaningful primarily as evidence of Jonson's technical and formal mastery. The exhibition avoided any discussion of the cultural context surrounding images of Native American subjects or the appropriation of motifs from Southwest Indian design. Instead, it characterized Jonson's interest in Native American art as exclusively aesthetic; the printed guide concludes with a quote from Jonson's brother, Arthur Johnson, writing to Ed Garman:

A few works in the early thirties were frankly based on Indian design, but unlike many other paintings of the Southwest, he did not become a painter of Indians and Indian ceremonies or of imitations of Indian works. By filtering the Indian design through his own concept of organization, he was able to make use of it... in the final synthesis of his *design*.²³

Arthur Johnson intended to promote his brother as a pioneer of abstract art, and emphasized his originality by discounting the significance of American Indian art. Though Jonson did, of course, "filter Indian design through his own concept of organization," his work is not free of any influence from the cultural context in which the original designs were created. By framing their exhibition around Arthur Johnson's interpretative strategy, Traugott and Blankenship missed an opportunity to address the

²³ Arthur Johnson to Ed Garman, 31 Jan., 1974, quoted in Joseph Traugott and Tiska Blankenship, *Symbolizing New Mexico: Native Iconographic Influences in Raymond Jonson's Painting* (Albuquerque: Jonson Gallery of the University of New Mexico, 1992), 12.

layers of meaning inherent in Jonson's use of Native American themes, especially in relation to the wider social discourse in which they were created.

Despite its brevity, Rushing's work remains the most comprehensive exploration of Native American imagery in Jonson's work. Though Rushing positioned Jonson within the broader contexts surrounding modernist primitivism in the first half of the twentieth century, his analysis provides only a limited account of the significance of Southwestern Indian cultures and arts within Jonson's oeuvre. My analysis of Jonson's writing and painting establishes that he understood Native American art as exemplifying the potential of religious art to convey meaning through abstraction. And, as I demonstrate, Jonson interpreted the religious significance of Native American visual culture through the lens of Theosophy and related metaphysical religions, believing that American Indians maintained an ancient mode of representation that facilitated the direct conveyance of ineffable spiritual knowledge.

This belief, in fact, was central to Jonson's decision to move from Chicago to Santa Fe, as he searched for authentic religious art. Jonson first traveled to New Mexico in 1914 on a painting trip with a friend from Texas, J. Blanding Sloan.²⁴ Glad to escape Chicago, which he referred to in a letter to his mother as a "filthy, stinking hole," Jonson returned to New Mexico in 1922 for a longer stay in Santa Fe, financed by a wealthy collector, John Curtis Underwood.²⁵ He and Vera stayed the summer and were immensely impressed by the stunning landscapes as well as the cultural diversity in the region. Though the dramatic vistas and unusual landforms in northern New

²⁴ Hartel, 87.

²⁵ Jonson to Josephine Johnson, 29 Jan., 1918, Raymond Jonson Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [RJ 1:69]; Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*, 176.

Mexico were compelling, his letters from the time suggest that the unique local cultures exerted an even stronger pull. He began to develop a sense of the Native Americans' and Hispanic Nuevomexicanos' geographical authenticity that would eventually inform his art; as he wrote, "the people here, that is those who seem to fit the surroundings, Mexicans and Indians, are most interesting."²⁶

The Jonsons were so impressed by the region that they made plans that summer to move to the area permanently, which they accomplished in 1924.²⁷ To Jonson, leaving Chicago for New Mexico was a decisive break in his career, the point at which he determined to devote himself to art that he considered "authentic." He abandoned commercial art to produce paintings that he felt conveyed personal meaning while expressing universal spiritual values. Following contemporary critical ideals, Jonson understood un-commissioned easel painting as vastly superior to commercial design, and believed that relocating to Santa Fe would free him from the necessity of taking commercial illustration jobs. As he wrote to his mother in 1924 about his pending move, "I hope I can bid farewell to this commercialism that eats up the soul of man."²⁸

Although Jonson was a devoted promoter of modernism, he saw the modern city as antithetical to the development of a new and meaningful art. Though numerous artists celebrated the burgeoning metropolises of the early twentieth century as epitomizing the advancements of modernity, Jonson found Chicago a vapid and

²⁶ Jonson to Josephine Johnson, 8 Jun., 1922, Raymond Jonson Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [RJ 1:95].

²⁷ Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*, 57.

²⁸ Jonson to Josephine Johnson, 21 Mar., 1924, Raymond Jonson Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [RJ1:106-107].

energating mass of “dirt and noise,” as he described it.²⁹ T. J. Jackson Lears described the rapidly changing city as a place where a confusion of multivalent, but usually unintelligible symbols “reinforced feelings of diffuseness and disorientation.”³⁰ As it had for Lears’ subjects, the city became for Jonson a place of confusion and disorder, where commercialism edged out any possibility of authentic experience—a place of “unreality.”³¹

Jonson felt completely different about Santa Fe. A significant part of the lure of New Mexico was the conception that it was a place somehow outside of time, inhabited by cultures that were remnants of an earlier era. A central tenet of primitivist thought maintained that the peoples deemed least advanced by evolutionist anthropology were closer to an original state of existence, reflective of the condition of all of humanity in the distant past.³² Early twentieth century tourist literature about the Southwest drew heavily from this conception, promoting the region as home to Native Americans living in a state of perpetual stasis. George Wharton James, for example, offered a picturesque view of an idealized life before the stresses of modernity arose with the advent of technological civilization. In *New Mexico: the Land of the Delight Makers*, 1920, he referred to the state as a “place where past, present and future are hand in

²⁹ Jonson to Arthur Johnson, 22 Sept., 1922, Raymond Jonson Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [RJ1:96].

³⁰ Lears, 33.

³¹ Lears borrowed the term from T. S. Elliot’s “The Waste Land,” 1922. See Lears, 33.

³² See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 10-17. Fabian argued that Western academicians perpetuate such conceptions in the present by maintaining language that implies that cultures under study are not fully “coeval” with those conducting research.

hand, where antithesis reigns supreme, ancient and modern civilizations jog elbows, and where the present sits in the very lap of the prehistoric.”³³

Like many contemporary writers, Jonson believed that much of the unique character of the region owed to the presence of peoples living in suspended time, outside of history. Perhaps the most outspoken proponent of such a view in the Southwest was Mabel Dodge Luhan, who wrote that “History begins when succession in time begins and the Indians are in a real, literal sense pre-historic, pre-time, ahead of time, so to speak.”³⁴ Jonson, who had envisioned his move from Chicago to New Mexico as a means of escaping the negative influences of commercialized modern culture, recognized the presence of Native Americans in the Southwest as a marker of the region’s remoteness from everything that he had left behind. He and his wife made numerous visits to the Pueblos to see ceremonial dances, and began collecting Native American art and cultural objects shortly after moving to the region—their collection, which included rugs, blankets, pottery, jewelry, and other items, eventually became part of the Maxwell Museum of Anthropology at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque.³⁵ During the first ten years of their life in New Mexico, before Jonson found steady employment with the University of New Mexico, his wife, Vera, worked

³³ George Wharton James, *New Mexico: the Land of the Delight Makers* (Boston: Colonial Press, 1920), viii.

³⁴ Mabel Dodge Luhan, “From the Source,” *Laughing Horse* 11 (Sept., 1924): n. p.

³⁵ See Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde*, 83-84; Hartel, 222. Jonson mentioned witnessing Pueblo dances in numerous letters; see Jonson to Josephine Johnson, 3 Aug., 1922, Raymond Jonson Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [RJ 1:96]; Jonson to Rudhyar, 5 Aug., 1937, Raymond Jonson Archives.

at the Indian and Mexican Trading Store in Santa Fe, from whence she presumably acquired much of their collection.³⁶

During this period, Jonson created his first artworks that directly addressed his encounter with Native Americans in the Southwest. In *Cliff Dwellings No. 3*, 1928, (fig. 24) he depicted a multi-room stone structure high on the side of a dramatic cliff, similar to a number of ruins from the Ancestral Puebloan period that remain popular tourist attractions in the Four Corners area. Interestingly, the image focuses on the surrounding landscape far more than the actual cliff dwelling, which stands out only for its slightly more regular geometry than the rock-forms around it. Jonson made the structure blend in remarkably well with the landscape, painting the building with the same colors as the rock it abuts. This reflects one of the striking aspects of viewing such sites—the difficulty in importing building materials from any distance to such inaccessible locations meant that they were generally constructed from rock found in the immediate vicinity, and they give a striking impression as being literally part of the surrounding cliff-side.

Jonson emphasized this merging of the structure and the mountain even further by repeating the visual motif of the three black windows on the building in three black marks on the rock near the bottom left corner of the canvas. Likewise, the overall form of the landscape, with a high butte in the center, stepping down in successive layers, matches the step-like roofline of the cliff dwelling. The close visual connection between the building and the surrounding rock emphasizes Jonson's conception of the closeness of the Southwestern Indians to the land itself. In fact, the rock face is painted

³⁶ Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*, 176.

with a perfectly smooth exposed edge surrounding the central part of the painting, making the cliff appear as it had been cut away to show a view of the structure nestled inside. Rushing described the structure in *Cliff Dwellings No. 3* as appearing “tucked away as if it had grown inside the womb of the earth, only to be covered over by layers of geological time...”³⁷ As if to make this point even more emphatic, Jonson depicted the cliff dwelling within a clearly outlined heart shape, placing the ancient inhabitants of the region at the very heart of the Earth.

In *Cliff Dwellings No. 1*, 1926 (Fig. 25), Jonson depicted the remnants of a circular, multi-room building known as Tyuonyi Pueblo, approximately twenty miles northwest of Santa Fe in what is now Bandelier National Monument.³⁸ The Ancestral Puebloan structure, built around 1000 CE, sits in a narrow valley, underneath a series of rooms fashioned out of natural cavities in the rock face to the north. Jonson’s perspective in this painting is from inside the cliff dwellings, looking out, as shown in a recent photograph of the same view (Fig. 26). Jonson exaggerated the vertical perspective in his painting, making his position in the cliff dwelling seem much farther from the valley floor than it actually is. As in *Cliff Dwellings No. 3*, he repeated formal elements of the ruin in the surrounding rock, emphasizing a connection between the Native Americans and the land—the cavities in the rocky pinnacles in the center of the image resemble the individual rooms in the structure. Jonson’s broad, square brush strokes on the inside of the outer lip of the cliff dwelling repeat the same motif. The

³⁷ Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde*, 81.

³⁸ Interestingly, this site, which was rapidly becoming a tourist destination in the 1920s, was among those that Nicholas Roerich specifically noted having visited during his 1921 trip to New Mexico. See Drayer, 44.

curvilinear, almost cellular appearance of the walls of the compartmentalized structure contrast with the careful linear geometry of the fields in the distant background, as if to further associate the ruin's ancient inhabitants with the irregular, organic forms of nature, rather than the precision of modern civilization.

Jonson's *Cliff Dwellings* series reflects the then-widely accepted belief that American Indians were, in some sense, more closely connected to the land than peoples who had arrived on the continent later. The origins of this discourse date at least as early as Rousseau, who promoted the idea of the "natural man," an original being who was free from the strictures that arose with the advent of civilized society. In Jonathan Marks' words, Rousseau's association of complete freedom with a state of pure naturalness implies that "nature and history are strictly separated;" the beginning of history as an evolutionary process that took humanity further from nature abrogated this state of original freedom.³⁹

Later theorists of primitivism continued to emphasize the close connection to nature that primitive peoples were alleged to maintain. This discourse heavily informed early twentieth century writing about Native Americans. The idea that Indians were somehow physically or psychically connected to the earth was a commonplace that still finds expression in characterization of Native Americans as innate environmentalists.⁴⁰ Literature about the Puebloans was replete with allusions to this trope: Edgar Hewett

³⁹ Jonathan Marks, *Perfection and Disharmony in the Thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 23.

⁴⁰ See Shepard Krech III, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999) for a critical analysis of allusions to Native American cultural practices and perspectives throughout a range of twentieth century environmental movements. Jon Bloch considers this phenomenon within the context of metaphysical religion in "Alternative Spirituality and Environmentalism," *Review of Religious Research* 40, no. 1 (Sep., 1998): 55-73.

described them as “a harmonious element in [the] landscape... He never dominates it, as does the European his environment, but belongs there like the mesas, skies, sunshine, spaces, and the other living creatures... seeking no superior place for himself but merely a state of harmony with all created things...”⁴¹ John Collier, who, as I discuss in chapter two, espoused the views of his close associate, Mabel Dodge Luhan, adhered closely to Rousseau in suggesting that American Indian cultures predated history itself. As Joel Pfister wrote, “Collier’s understanding of the Pueblos’ ‘depth’ had a material foundation—the land. He often viewed the Pueblos not so much psychologically as having individual atomized psyches but ecologically as embodiments of the land.”⁴²

Theosophists used the Native Americans’ alleged closeness to the land, and their supposed tribal unity to exemplify the ideal relationship of an individual to the universe. As James Albert Clark wrote, the doctrine of reincarnation meant that a body was nothing more than temporary clothing for “the real man, the individuality, the entity that never changes.”⁴³ Though Western societies had adopted an unhealthy view that gave precedence to the physical body, he asserted, Native Americans still understood that their present corporeal form was merely one of many “natural coverings” that would be donned and then abandoned over successive lifetimes. Apparently oblivious to the vast diversity among indigenous dialects, he claimed that the structure of their language made this clear: “the nature student, whether an intuitive American Indian, or a Sanscrit pundit, would seek to convey the impression ‘my body is cold,’ not ‘I am cold,’ for ‘I,’

⁴¹ Hewett, *Ancient Life in the American Southwest*, 162.

⁴² Pfister, 193.

⁴³ James Albert Clark, *A Theosophist’s Point of View* (Washington, DC: Press of the Pathfinder, 1901), 24.

and the body, the personality, the mask, are conceptions apart.”⁴⁴ To Clark, the Native Americans’ close observation of the earth’s physical processes gave them an understanding of human nature that was concomitant with the most advanced wisdom of Asia, far superior to that of modern Western civilization.

In his *Cliff Dwellings*, Jonson used correspondences between the stylized landscape and the geometry of the architectural forms to suggest the close connection between indigenous peoples of the Southwest and the land they inhabited. In this respect, Jonson’s work is actually much closer in spirit to more familiar contemporary images of Native America than critics have recognized. Maynard Dixon’s *Earth Knower*, 1931 (fig. 19) for example, painted in Taos within just a few years of Jonson’s *Cliff Dwellings No. 3*, depicts a profile view of a Pueblo man from the waist up, set against the dramatically lit expanse of an open canyon or the side of a mesa, the red sandstone glowing in the warm light of a low sun. The figure does not return the viewer’s gaze, but looks outside of the frame to the left, a “statuesque” pose that Erica Doss interpreted as expressing Dixon’s idealization of “Indians as the wise men of the Old West...”⁴⁵

His position in the left third of the canvas, facing outward, would seem jarringly out of balance except that the flattened geometrical forms of the rock-face in the right half of the image rhyme with the patterns of flat light and shadow in the cloak. Dixon repeated the soft texture of the robe in his treatment of the rock formation, especially in the foreground right. The figure’s cloak is composed of earth tones, thought slightly

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Doss, 20.

less red than the land in the background—but Dixon painted his face with a nearly identical palate as the rock to the his immediate left, even seeming to continue the straight diagonal that outlines the top of the nearest slope in the man’s cheekbone. The Indian in *Earth Knower* seems literally at one with the surrounding land. As the title implies, Dixon’s image was meant to emblemize the close connection to the land that Native Americans were alleged to possess, celebrating their supposed natural and authentic purity as an alternative to the psychically debilitating strain of mechanized Western society.⁴⁶

Jonson had moved to New Mexico with the expressed intention of leaving behind the spirit-crushing machinery of the modern city, “dirty, brainless Chicago,” as he wrote.⁴⁷ He envisioned the therapeutic potential of the desert not as a result of the salubrious climate or the inspiring beauty of the land, but in direct relation to the cultures that lived there. In 1949, he described a “moment of ecstasy” to his art appreciation class, in which he suddenly knew during his first visit to New Mexico that he was destined to live there:

About 26 or 27 years ago I sat out at the foot of a group of mesas in New Mexico within a hundred yards of the Rio Grande and contemplated the formations that the Indians had lived in and on for centuries past. Something happened. Again, I don’t know what it was, but at that point, at that great moment, there was that feeling of complete chemical change, almost as if I were turned into a different individual.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Linda Jones Gibbs read *Earth Knower* as Dixon’s response to the onset of the Depression. See *Escape to Reality: the Western World of Maynard Dixon* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2000), 111-113.

⁴⁷ Jonson to Josephine Johnson, 5 Jan., 1924. Raymond Jonson Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [RJ 1: 105].

⁴⁸ Raymond Jonson, talk presented at the Chili Club, Santa Fe, 29 Aug., 1949. Raymond Jonson Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [RJ 9:6329].

He characterized the event as a moment of rebirth in explicitly religious terms, noting that the only comparable occurrence that he had previously experienced was when he felt converted to his church as a youth.⁴⁹ Contemplating the inestimable depth of the indigenous peoples' relationship to the land, both in chronology and in significance, Jonson felt the same spiritual stirring that he had when he became convinced that he was born again as a Christian.

Though Jonson did not elaborate any further on why this experience was so moving, it took place near a pivotal moment in his career, when he determined to reject commercial art in order to devote himself to spiritual expression through painting. He recognized the Indians' supposed unity with their environment as the source of the natural power that animated their art. Metaphysical writers asserted that Native Americans' intimate knowledge of the processes of nature elevated their culture over the materialist societies of the West. As Havelock Ellis wrote, "The 'medicine-man' is not more an embryonic man of science than he is an embryonic mystic; he is both equally." Through his religious practice, he "enters into harmony with the universe," the means by which he is enabled to "gain organized knowledge of natural processes that he can to some extent foresee or even control..."⁵⁰

To metaphysical observers, the Southwestern Indians had developed an understanding of the earth, expressed in their religious practices, that was unsurpassed by Western science, if different in its fundamental character. As Hewett described,

⁴⁹ He spoke about this event in more detail in his lecture to the Chili Club in 1949. He wrote that "Without any warning while alone one day in our home when I was about 11 years old I had the feeling that God in person appeared to me and informed me I was ready to be converted to Jesus and join the church." Raymond Jonson, talk presented at the Chili Club, Santa Fe, 29 Aug., 1949. Raymond Jonson Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [RJ 9:6329].

⁵⁰ Havelock Ellis, *The Dance of Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1923), 193.

Indian religion... in its essence it is almost what modern science has attained to—the conception of Nature and God as one. The Indian has arrived at it through ages of experience, of reflection, of participation in the manifestations of divine power; the scientist through systematic investigation and deduction. It doesn't matter which of the roads we have taken: "All of them lead to the light."⁵¹

Similarly, D. H. Lawrence, who interpreted Pueblo culture through the lens of Theosophy, wrote that the Indians achieved "sheer naked contact... with the elemental life of the cosmos," in what was "the religion which precedes the god-concept, and is therefore greater and deeper than any god-concept."⁵² This conception of "Nature and God as one" harmonized with the principles of Theosophy, which located divinity in the sum of universal forces, rather than an individual, elevated being.

But Theosophists also believed that American Indians had developed an understanding of nature that far surpassed the abilities of modern science. They asserted that Indians made use of natural, but invisible forces that could be manipulated with the mind and will; the "medicine man's" control of natural processes, in Ellis's terms. It was through their knowledge of occult principles, Theosophists alleged, that Native Americans were able to work what the uninitiated could only describe as magic. Robert Ellwood summarized the position of Theosophists beginning with Blavatsky, claiming that religion in its earliest forms was "based on knowledge of the occult powers of nature." He continued:

The occult (i.e. hidden) truth of nature is that its visible, material form is but the expression of invisible, immaterial spiritual realities. These facts were better comprehended, at least intuitively, in the simpler human cultures of remote antiquity than now. Furthermore, the folk of those cultures were able to wield effectively the powers such comprehension gave, whether in the magical flight

⁵¹ Hewett, *Ancient Life in the American Southwest*, 74.

⁵² Quoted in Wenger, *We Have a Religion*, 122-123.

of the shaman or the power behind the glowing forms made by the cave-artist's brush.⁵³

Theosophical writers claimed that the Southwestern Indians had maintained their mastery of aspects of nature invisible to materialist scientists, and were thus able to perform feats inexplicable by the lesser knowledge of Western physical science. "Zuñi Magic," printed in *Theosophical Outlook* magazine in 1919, related experiences that Frank Hamilton Cushing had at Zuñi ceremonials, which he could not rationally explain.⁵⁴ The author interpreted these events in relation to Asiatic "occult powers," a subject that had been thoroughly explored in Theosophical literature, and claimed that "the Zuñis have brought down from elder days some of the secrets of the old Atlantean magic..." The article continues by asserting that the Southwestern Indians maintained communication with even more ancient cultures:

Moreover, there are those among them who are in touch with that most ancient lodge that has its habitat in Central America, whose initiates have climbed high on the occult ladder, and wield powers unknown to the modern world. These great ones of the Fourth Race have still their disciples, and find them most readily among the children of their own ancient root.⁵⁵

Jonson used similar terminology in his address to the Axis Group, expressing his own belief in "psychic powers" latent in humans that only a few advanced individuals had learned to unlock.⁵⁶

Though Jonson did not specifically associate these phenomena with Native Americans, several of his close associates did. Dane Rudhyar described the ceremonial

⁵³ Robert S. Ellwood, *Theosophy: a Modern Expression of the Wisdom of the Ages* (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1986), 181.

⁵⁴ I omit Cushing's details in deference to the Zuñi preference to maintain ceremonial secrecy.

⁵⁵ "Zuñi Magic," *Theosophical Outlook* 4, no. 43 (Oct., 1919): 340.

⁵⁶ Jonson, "Psychic Phenomena."

dances that he and Jonson saw at the Pueblos as, in essence, “magic forces of will stamping the inert into the magnificence of corn-growing grain...”⁵⁷ Even observers without any particular religious agenda felt compelled to admit that the Native Americans’ ceremonies held genuine power over nature. Erna Ferguson believed, though she could not explain how, that the Hopi Snake Dance actually did summon rain. Describing the end of the ceremony, she wrote, “As the late afternoon light wanes, dusk is usually hastened by the gathering of huge clouds, streaks of rain appear over distant mesas... then comes the long, swishing, sweet-smelling rain... The Snake-dance always brings rain.”⁵⁸ Others claimed that the Native Americans’ unique relationship to the land, the source of their advanced knowledge of both physical and psychical powers, would help usher in the new root race, much as Bisttram believed. Mary Austin wrote that in New Mexico, “the union of land and culture would produce a new human race, one that would rival the artistic and social accomplishments of ancient Greece and Rome.”⁵⁹

Cliff Dwellings No. 3 most clearly references the “occult powers” allegedly possessed by Native Americans in the sheets of gray-green rain falling in narrow bands immediately over the ruins, as if magic from a distant era were still latent in the structure, continuing to summon moisture long after the inhabitants had dispersed. As the rain connects the sky with the ground from above, lone conifer trees lead the eye from the bottom up, creating an angular path directly to the top of the canvas, with the

⁵⁷ Dane Rudhyar, *Rania* (San Francisco: Unity Press, 1973), 59.

⁵⁸ Ferguson, 113.

⁵⁹ Mary Austin, *The Land of Journey’s Ending* (New York: Century, 1924), 439.

cliff dwelling positioned near the center. Jonson's composition emphasizes the verticality of the central pinnacle of rock, with little canvas above its top or below its base; the trees further this effect, focusing on the dramatic height of the structure on the cliff side, and linking the image with the traditional association of elevated height with proximity to divine presence.

This sense of loftiness and closeness to celestial spheres suggests that the site is elevated above the mundane world in a metaphysical sense, as well. The planes of "higher consciousness" that Jonson interpreted through Theosophy in his address to the Axis Group were physically located above the earth. He wrote of a "field of recording [of] all the thoughts, actions, etc. that are produced here on earth," and added that "this field is a band around the earth a certain distance out in space, in ether, and there is the material for us if we are able to tap it... Genius may therefore be the ability of tapping this reservoir of knowledge..."⁶⁰

Jonson described what Theosophists termed the "Âkâshic Record," a concept first developed by Blavatsky, but clarified and popularized by Besant, stipulating that all thoughts, actions, and expressions are indelibly imprinted in a physically imperceptible ether enveloping the world. Besant wrote, "The Âkâsha is the store-house of all forms, the treasure-house whereinto are poured—from the infinite wealth of the Universal Mind—the rich stores of all the Ideas that are to be bodied forth in a given Kosmos... from all the actions performed on every plane by all forms."⁶¹ Much as the idea of a "universal mind" had inspired Pelton, Jonson understood inspiration as the

⁶⁰ Jonson, "Psychic Phenomena."

⁶¹ Annie Besant, "Karma," *Lucifer* XVI (Mar. -Aug., 1895): 492.

ability to access this body of knowledge, but Jonson put less of a mystical bent on the concept, defining it as a concrete, physically explicable phenomenon, only composed of a matter too “fine,” as he termed it, to be subject to scientific scrutiny.⁶²

Cliff Dwellings No. 3 positions the ancient inhabitants of the Southwest in a direct path linking the occult power that arose through intimate familiarity with the physical world with that which came from the “universal mind” pervading the ether above the earth. Placed in the heart of the Earth, at the axis between realms above and below, the meeting of spiritual and physical planes, the cliff dwelling represents the unique position of power that Jonson accorded Native Americans: they emblemized his conception of spiritual progression, leading lives allegedly rich in both natural and spiritual knowledge. Echoing Jonson’s sentiment in *Cliff Dwellings No. 3*, Rudhyar wrote that artists inspired by Native American cultures and their apparent connection to the land were not simply blinding themselves to the problems of the cities, where every view evinced the “confused and materialistic trend of the day.” Instead, they had found a richer life:

With these painters of the Southwest, whose eyes may scan the vast spaces of the desert and whose sensibilities may feel the solidity of the earth-born structures of Indian life and Indian crafts, transcendental painting is no psychological escape away from our metropolises... the desert is the realm of light and of root-forms, geometrical and austere: a realm of freedom and yet of universality in which the individual can be an individual while feeling his oneness with the rhythm with the universal heart.⁶³

To the Transcendental Painting Group, the romanticized, “earth-born” cultures of the Southwestern Indians exemplified the harmonious balance between the spiritual and the

⁶² Jonson, “Psychic Phenomena.”

⁶³ Rudhyar, *A New Growth Proves the Fertility of the Southwest*.

physical aspects of nature, a way of living that gave access to the “universal mind” and ultimately granted the expression of allegedly universal truth.

While aspects of Jonson’s approach to the Native Americans of the Southwest were celebratory, even progressive in their acceptance of the validity of indigenous religions, his primitivist view also incorporated contemporary conceptions of the American Indians as diminished remnants of a once-great culture. Much as Pelton and Bistram had, Jonson focused on the ancient wisdom of the Indians in a manner that seemed to deny modern Pueblo people the same advanced spiritual state that their ancestors had attained. Significantly, in *Cliff Dwellings No. 3* Jonson associated the exceptional physical and psychical powers of the Native Americans not with the contemporary residents of the region in which he lived, but with their remote and vanished ancestors. The structures in the painting look immaculate, and nothing in the image evinces the presence of any people—the buildings are essentially fossilized, with no sign of clutter, smoke, or light that might suggest they were in use. Not even a hint of color disturbs their pristine state. As if to emphasize the temporal distance separating the cliff dwelling from the present, Jonson included a line of prominent, jagged rocks in the lower foreground, creating an imposing visual barrier between the viewer and the ruins.

In *Cliff Dwellings No. 1*, Jonson employed a similar rocky boundary sealing off the abandoned structure from the viewer’s approach. In addition, he painted a striking disjuncture between the ruined pueblo and the signs of modern settlement, abruptly cutting off the plowed fields with the circular outer wall of the structure—the slightly blurred treatment of the background contrasts markedly with the sharply focused detail

of the ruin, giving the impression that the fields are located far below the level of the pueblo, when, in fact, the stream and once-cultivated plats are all at the same elevation on the valley floor. Despite the references to modern human activity in *Cliff Dwellings No. 1*, Jonson's composition positions the ruins in a space set apart from contemporary time.

Cliff Dwellings No. 1 and *No. 3* both suggest that ancient, rather than modern Indians possessed the closest connection to the earth and the most advanced physical and psychical command over nature. Jonson was not alone in this view; as I described in chapter two, Theosophists argued that Native Americans were the last remnants of the fourth root race, the Atlanteans, whose civilization had been destroyed because they abused their advanced psychical powers. Like Bisttram, Jonson followed metaphysical writers in portraying the ancient ancestors of the Pueblo, not contemporary Indians, as possessing a fullness of spiritual truth.

Expressing Spirituality through Abstraction

Nonetheless, Jonson looked to contemporary Native American cultures as expressing at least some vestige of ancient knowledge, and interpreted American Indian art as expressing an ideal aesthetic for conveying religious ideas. Jonson depended on two primary sources for his knowledge of Southwest Indian art: as Rushing has noted, he carefully observed the objects that he and Vera collected, but he also relied on Rudhyar's descriptions of Southwest Indian art. Rudhyar was interested in Native American ritual observance extending beyond their supposed "occult powers," and asserted that their art could be characterized as "magic."

He argued that there were, at base, just two types of art: the “magical” and the “analytical.” The first describes art created with the intent of effecting a particular physical result, which he related to the “primitive period of art,” when artists sought to “represent the most essential characteristics of natural beings or elements surrounding [them] in order to gain power over them.”⁶⁴ The resulting images were, in Rudhyar’s description, “the results of a direct psychic experience... identification with an archetype which can be reached in that mysterious realm of the Collective Unconscious—the Planetary Matrix of all the lives swarming over this Earth...”⁶⁵ Rudhyar drew on Jung’s conception of archetypal images forming a universal consciousness, but added his own Theosophical bent by associating this realm with the Âkâshic Record forming a physical “Planetary Matrix” which artists could access through “psychic experience.”⁶⁶

In Rudhyar’s view, primitive art was essentially magical. He traced the influence of this theme through art from archaic periods up to the present, arguing that the best art in all ages was intended to produce a transforming effect. This was, he claimed, the most important characteristic of sacred art, as attested by the best examples of religious imagery from across the world and throughout history; “in every case art—great, sacred art—is based on magical associations with essences and archetypal forms... by painting or sculpting Christs or Buddhas the material artist sought to

⁶⁴ Rudhyar, *The Transcendental Movement in Painting*, 12

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ See chapter two for a discussion of Jung’s archetypal images in relation to Agnes Pelton’s art. Rudhyar borrowed the term “collective unconscious” from Jung, as he noted in *The Transcendental Movement in Painting*, 6.

penetrate this consciousness with the god-like Symbols he released from the Collective Unconscious...”⁶⁷

One of the most important aims of the Transcendental Painting Group, in his estimation, was to carry the magical approach forward in a manner that would be meaningful to the modern world, and eventually, as Bisttram had intended, advance the progression of the next root race in the coming new age: “The transcendental approach leads to a higher spirit-impregnated primitiveness, a new type of ‘sacred art’ in which the creative artist fathers forth a new civilization born of ever-surging life...”⁶⁸ In Rudhyar’s view, most attempts at bringing “primitiveness” into modern art failed to convey anything but aesthetic disorder. As I note in chapter three, he singled out Picasso’s references to African art as an attempt to bring about the “disintegration of culture,” rather than to advance it forward. Picasso, he felt, was only working with the “combinations of color and exotic shapes of primitive cultures,” and not the underlying magical aspect of primitive art.⁶⁹ By extracting from primitive art its most central and important element, not merely the formal qualities, but the “power behind the glowing forms made by the cave-artist’s brush,” as Ellwood put it, the modern artist could put that same power to use in the development of a new era of civilization.⁷⁰

Analytical art, conversely, was antithetical to truly sacred expression in Rudhyar’s view. It included any art that was purely observational, and not oriented toward action. He characterized much twentieth century modernist art as merely about

⁶⁷ Ibid, 12.

⁶⁸ Ibid. , 17.

⁶⁹ Rudhyar, *Culture, Crisis, and Creativity*, 66.

⁷⁰ Ellwood, 181.

aesthetics, qualities that he associated with “Classical” periods, in which artists, rather than aiding in the progressive evolution of the world, merely created images for delectation. Rudhyar was adamant that any form of primitivism that was based solely on a revival of archaic aesthetics rather than on a renewed commitment to magical art was, ironically, nothing more than a new iteration of classicism. As he expressed, “It is part of a counterculture which, in its polarized reaction against our culture, most often refocuses, in a nonrationalistic and nonformalistic manner, what in fact are still the hedonistic characteristics of the culture attitude since the Classical period; thus, the basic desire for the ‘profane’ and temporary enjoyment of forms.”⁷¹

“Absolute Painting”

Beginning in the early 1930s, Jonson developed a theory of ideal religious art, which he expressed not only in his painting, but in writing. Using Rudhyar’s and other metaphysical writers’ work as models, Jonson sought to create art that would serve a religious function more than just reproduce religious imagery. As did Pelton and Bistram, Jonson believed that art should awaken the mind to a spiritual state and give access to the “universal” realm of pure knowledge. And, as they did, he looked to Native American art as a source. But his model differed in several key respects from his contemporaries in the Transcendental Painting Group; Jonson formulated an aesthetic that he referred to as “absolute painting,” which was based on the complete rejection of any element of representation or symbolism, in favor of bare, direct emotional expression.

⁷¹ Rudhyar, *Culture, Crisis, and Creativity*, 81.

Though Jonson did not settle on the term “absolute” until sometime in the 1940s, he began explicating his aesthetic theory early in the previous decade. In 1936, he gave a lecture to the Art Club of Albuquerque titled, “The Non-Objective in Painting,” in which he argued for a diametrical relationship between representational illusionism and spiritual effectiveness in a work of art. As he wrote, “a complete emotional experience from a non-objective work is fuller and richer and more complete than from an objective work. At its best the non-objective work speaks through its spiritual potentiality.”⁷² He concluded the talk with an extensive quote from Hilla Rebay, a painter and advisor of Solomon R. Guggenheim:

Never before in the history of the world has there been a greater step forward from the materialistic to the spiritual than from objectivity to non-objectivity in painting. Because it is our destiny to become creative and our fate to become spiritual, humanity will come to develop and enjoy greater intuitive power through creations of great art, the glorious masterpieces of non-objectivity.⁷³

Following Rebay, Jonson equated representational art with materialism, ineradicably tied to the physical forms that it depicted. Writers who criticized art from a Theosophical perspective expressed similar views. Artist and Theosophist, Leonard Lester, writing in the *Theosophical Path*, argued that “the true escape from external *realism* lies in a deeper knowledge of Reality. Our typical art of today is largely dominated by the prevailing material conception of man and nature...”⁷⁴

As Jonson understood it, spirituality dealt with the entire range of human experience that transcended the transitory physical space of the world. Non-objective

⁷² Jonson, “The Non-Objective in Painting.”

⁷³ Hartel traced the source of the quote to Rebay’s essay, “Definition of Non-objective Painting,” in *Solomon R. Guggenheim Collection of Non-Objective Paintings* (New York: Bradford Press, 1936): 13.

⁷⁴ Leonard Lester, “Thoughts on Current Art: Concepts of Life and Art. The Higher Realism,” *Theosophical Path* XIV (Jan-Jun, 1918): 74.

art was superior, he believed, because it made no reference to the physical sphere, but gave the artist a means of expressing pure and unfiltered emotions through the arrangement of line, shape, and color; this meant that the work of art could function as a direct intermediary between the viewer and an essential religious or spiritual meaning. Jonson believed that if an artist focused his or her inner emotions into the creation of an abstract work, the same emotions would be directly conveyed to a receptive viewer. He wrote, “the work that surpasses or transcends the natural and undeveloped aspect of the paint can approach and at times move directly into the spiritual, providing the feeling and attitude on the part of the painter deals with the inner spirit of man rather than the outer and physical.”⁷⁵ No symbols, references to worldly conditions, or physical language were required in non-representational art, making its apprehension, ideally, a purely spiritual experience. As he explained, “some of us believe that the spirit is an inner consciousness and therefore in dealing with it, it seems most appropriate to use forms, shapes and color that are not interpretations of the outer aspect of life but rather deal with the concept of soul and God.”⁷⁶

Theosophists conceived of God as a universal presence, the ultimate source of the laws of nature, not as an embodied being. Just as the Absolute, to use Blavatsky’s term for divinity, was abstract, any art that attempted to approach it, Jonson believed, could not simply represent material objects, no matter how much symbolic meaning they conveyed.⁷⁷ Non-objective art, to the contrary, transcended any expression of

⁷⁵ Jonson, talk presented to the Chili Club, 29 Aug., 1949.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Blavatsky, *Key to Theosophy*, 44.

mere physical experience and attained to the level of emotion, intuition, and religious feeling, all realms that Jonson associated with the spiritual. His definition of the term, from a 1949 lecture, included all of these aspects. “Spirit,” he wrote, is “the life principle viewed as the ‘breath’ or gift of deity; hence, the agent of vital and conscious functions in man; the soul... the intellectual and higher endowments of the mind... And of course of sacred things in the religions.”⁷⁸

Jonson used the term “absolute painting” to describe the manner in which the formal elements of art could express aspects of reality beyond the purview of physical experience. In an absolute painting, the artist did not merely abstract from natural forms, but created an entirely new “environment” that stood apart from the rest of the objective world. As he described:

By absolute painting we mean painting which is entirely creative... The emotional element exists through the dynamic apprehension, on the part of the painter, of a particular created environment. These environments are invented and imagined by the painter and knowingly have no connection with physical environments. These environments are therefore of another world, the inner or spiritual.⁷⁹

As Jonson argued, this newly created environment could convey meaning in ways that language, symbolism, and references to physical objects could not.

Jonson intended the term “absolute” to describe an aesthetic that eliminated any aspect of referentiality—an art that was limited to the absolute essence of form. In this respect, his theory is superficially similar to the aesthetic system advocated by Clement

⁷⁸ Jonson, talk presented to the Chili Club, 29 Aug., 1949. Jonson’s use of the plural “religions” reflects his standpoint that no one religion had a monopoly on truth, and also accords with the Theosophists’ perspective that their organization was not a religion, but an organization dedicated to synthesizing the truth from all religions.

⁷⁹ Jonson, lecture notes, 29 Sept., 1948. Raymond Jonson Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [RJ 8:6242].

Greenberg and his associates, which would come to prominence in the 1940s, not long after Jonson had begun defining his own aesthetic views. The most obvious connection is the preference for non-objective art. Greenberg viewed “flatness” as the characteristic most unique to painting, and thus the most important to emphasize in order to reach the full potential inherent in the medium. Any illusion of depth or allusion to the outside world would detract from the “purity,” using Greenberg’s term, of a painting’s expression. He wrote, “Realistic, illusionist art had dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art. Modernism used art to call attention to art.”⁸⁰

Jonson’s student, Ed Garman, began his career near the height of Greenberg’s influence, and interpreted Jonson’s work through Greenberg’s theory of modernism. Garman described Jonson’s goal as the creation of an art “free from subject matter other than that inherent in the elements and materials of painting and how they are influenced by the thoughts and feelings of the artist.”⁸¹ He asserted that Jonson “was never attached to subject matter or the description of subject matter as such.”⁸² Even clearer connections were drawn between Jonson’s and Greenberg’s ideas in a 1982 exhibition at the Albuquerque Museum, the first to reunite the work of the Transcendental Painting Group after its dissolution in the 1940s. Anne Glusker and James Monte’s catalog for *The Transcendental Painting Group, New Mexico, 1938-1941* argued that despite the fact that some of the artists included recognizable symbols in their works, the group

⁸⁰ Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” in *Art in Theory, 1900-1990*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1992), 755.

⁸¹ Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*, 88.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 73.

members' "true obsession seems to have been their mode of painting."⁸³ Instead of thoroughly investigating the symbolic context of their work, the authors focused instead on their place within the modernist canon, and claimed that "among the best works of the Transcendental Painting Group are those that forsake this symbolism (or at least relegate it to the picture's title)," including Jonson's "geometrics."⁸⁴ Glusker and Monte continued by suggesting that the group's commitment to non-objectivity was an important step toward the "heroic age of American painting—which would be borne in on the shoulders of Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Clyfford Still..."⁸⁵

Though critics' intended their comparisons between Jonson and the Abstract Expressionists as praise, their descriptions risk misconstruing the nature of Jonson's project. Though there are significant stylistic similarities between his work and later non-objective painters, there are also important differences that distinguish Jonson's theory of an ideal aesthetic for religious art. Greenberg described the elimination of subject matter as a development that allowed the medium of painting to purify its formal aspects through "self-definition;" he emphasized that the object of abstraction was to "divest itself of everything it might share with sculpture," not merely to "exclude the representational or the 'literary'" as an end itself.⁸⁶

Jonson's conception of "purity" in absolute painting was markedly different—rather than focusing on the relative formal capacities of various media, he concluded

⁸³ Anne Glusker and James Monte, *The Transcendental Painting Group, New Mexico, 1938-1941* (Albuquerque: Albuquerque Museum, 1982).

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Greenberg, 756.

that the elimination of subject matter was a means of communicating a radically different type of signification. Conveying meaning, however, remained the central focus of his aesthetic. Jonson insisted that his art was not about “some unknown, unsolved riddle of the esoteric idea or some mystical idea of creation but rather a rich message for man of man because it includes all thoughts and ideas possible within the mind of man. That in a sense is the real meaning of the abstract in art.”⁸⁷ Far from adopting abstraction as a means of limiting the subject of his art to the formal aspects of the painting itself, Jonson abandoned physical referentiality for referentiality on a higher plane, where he believed he could approach truth in its full plenitude, “all thoughts and ideas possible within the mind of man.”

Jonson adopted the term “absolute” because, in addition to its reference to the essential formal aspects of a painting, it also conveyed a range of significant religious connotations. Hartel suggested that Jonson borrowed the word from Hilla Rebay; she wrote that “the reproduction of objects has changed to the art of non-objectivity in which form, rhythm, and color are used to create the absolute, with no intellectual relationship to the materialistic side of earth.”⁸⁸ Rebay’s use of the word “absolute” as a noun, rather than an adjective, would have evoked the religious discourse that used the word as a descriptor of the essential state of the universe underlying all visible and perceptible phenomena.

⁸⁷ Raymond Jonson to Vera Jonson, 23 Nov., 1931, Raymond Jonson Archives.

⁸⁸ Rebay, “Definition of Non-Objective Painting,” in *Solomon R. Guggenheim Collection of Non-Objective Paintings* (New York: Bradford Press, 1936), 8. Hartel noted that Jonson owned a copy of this work by 1937. See Hartel, 232.

“The Absolute,” usually capitalized, was a key term for Theosophists, perhaps best defined in Blavatsky’s *Secret Doctrine* as “the one and only reality—hence, everything extraneous to this Absolute, the generative and causative Element, *must* be an illusion...”⁸⁹ As Theosophists recognized divinity as a principle underlying every aspect of nature, rather than an embodied form, the Absolute represented their conception of God as the universal spirit or force animating the cosmos. In this context, Jonson’s adoption of the word to describe his mode of painting illuminated the purpose that he meant his art to serve. Rather than just painting non-objective art, he sought to convey the spiritual basis of all being by painting the pure emanations of his emotions and intellect without recourse to any symbolic language or representational idiom. More than merely describing his art as about the absolute essence of painting, the term “absolute painting” implied that it addressed the Absolute, the most fundamental “ultimate reality,” the realm of the divine.

Jonson’s conception of absolute painting as the ideal religious art is also indebted to perspectives on art promulgated by contemporary theorists of metaphysical religion. One of the most important roles of art, as Leonard Lester argued, was to give an individual the means of replicating on a microcosmic level the divine creative action that had originated the universe and was responsible for its continual evolution. He wrote, “A true work of art is such because it is insouled. It is pervaded throughout with the character of the creative urge that inspired it... The creation of a work of art is a

⁸⁹ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine*, 1:295.

putting into practice the structural laws of the universe; the expression of a presiding harmony shaping plastic material according to an ideal plan.”⁹⁰

Jonson agreed that artistic creation was an expression of the spirit. He wrote of his intent, “The hope has been to arrive at a state of pure feeling—to create through the spirit rather than the physical. To deal with shapes, forms, and color in such a way that they appear to expose the spirit of man rather than his physical being.” Showing close sympathy with Lester, Jonson added that he meant “to go beyond the appearance of the world and its forms into a realm of an idealistic condition of order and space that pertains to structure as it can function in the plastic creative act.”⁹¹ Creativity, to Jonson, was a religiously inflected concept. “Art’s office is the creation of a unity,” he wrote, “It is concerned in discovering and setting forth the wonders of a natural world with the wonder of the other... It is concerned in bringing about the fusion of matter with spirit, which is the object of creation itself.”⁹²

The emphasis that Jonson put on creativity and the expression of pure emotion led later interpreters to underestimate the degree to which his work addressed identifiable subjects, and participated in the larger cultural context in which it was situated. He claimed that his art was about “the purely imaginative where no religious object, no occult symbolism, and no abstraction is used—in short the absolute.”⁹³ Art historians largely took this statement at face value, even ignoring the religious basis for

⁹⁰ Leonard Lester, “Modern Art in the Light of Ancient Wisdom,” *Theosophical Path* XXV, no. 3 (Sept., 1923): 266.

⁹¹ Jonson, talk presented to the Chili Club, 29 Aug., 1949.

⁹² Jonson to Charles Morris, Jan. 1938, quoted in Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*, 106.

⁹³ Jonson, lecture notes, 29 Sept., 1948. Raymond Jonson Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [RJ 8:6242].

Jonson's aesthetic ideals that had prompted him to deny that his work had any symbolic content in the first place. In fact, Jonson's aesthetic theory was intimately related not just to the metaphysical religious views that he espoused, but to the wider contemporary cultural landscape. Nowhere is this more evident than in Jonson's use of Native American art as a model for religious painting.

Native American Art and Absolute Painting

Annie Besant argued that faithless modern cultures had produced a materialist art. She wrote, "Just as [modern nations] have become more luxurious and more materialistic, so have they lost touch with ancient art, as well as failed to produce anything vital and new."⁹⁴ She asserted that a new religious art would align itself with the values of ancient art, as artists from less materialistic ages had created objects with surpassing spiritual significance. She included not just the art of classical antiquity, but ancient art from various parts of Asia and art made by Native Americans.

Echoing the familiar trope that their advanced spirituality came from their closeness to nature, Besant argued that "all people who are in touch with nature live lives that are artistically beautiful." She continued, "The North American Indian, who is now rapidly disappearing before the progress of the white people—the mountains and the sky, the forest and the prairie, those were things that formerly wove themselves into his thought and into his life."⁹⁵ She advised artists to emulate the American Indians, who, she claimed, saw the spiritual basis underlying nature, not the material forms of its

⁹⁴ Annie Besant, *Buddhist Popular Lectures Delivered in Ceylon in 1907* (Adyar, India: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1908), 45.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

superficial appearance. “This is the message to art that Theosophy brings back,” she wrote, “Foster the religious spirit... and out of that shall grow a new art worthy of civilization...” Like the Indian, she wrote, “the artist is a man who looks beyond the physical.”⁹⁶

As Jonson attempted to “look beyond the physical,” he took Besant’s advice and tried to emulate the “superphysical” aspects that she believed characterized ancient art. Hartel identified *Southwest Arrangement*, 1933 (fig. 23), as one of Jonson’s first “almost totally non-representational” works, an important step in his development of “absolute painting.”⁹⁷ Garman, paraphrasing Jonson’s brother, Arthur, noted that the work is “frankly based on Indian design,” as if that were a drawback that needed acknowledgement, a potential suggestion that Jonson’s composition was not completely original. But, he continued, “By filtering the Indian design through his own concept of organization, he was able to make use of it, not by translating it, but rather by adapting it in such a way that it became a factor, soon shorn of its original identity, in the final synthesis of *design*.”⁹⁸ To Garman, Jonson’s process of appropriation was so complete and so transforming that the original identity of the Indian design was completely lost in the final painting. To be sure, Jonson expressed a similar viewpoint describing his *Pictographical Compositions* series in 1973. Noting that the works “were painted in a spirit of sympathy with primitive Indian design, while not copying it,” he claimed that

⁹⁶ Ibid., 48.

⁹⁷ Hartel, 222.

⁹⁸ Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*, 70-72.

they were “Jonson pictographs, not Indian.”⁹⁹ Jonson apparently wanted to make certain that his work would be treated as original abstractions, rather than as copies of ancient artworks.

Rushing, however, identified specific design motifs from Native American sources in the painting, including the linear “mountain” pattern repeated three times in mirror image on both the upper and lower halves of the canvas. He interpreted this appropriation of formal elements to suggest that “Pueblo and Navajo designs constitute an *abstract pictorial language* capable of creating the visual equivalent of an *essential, abstract nature*.”¹⁰⁰ As Rushing’s described, Jonson’s absolute art relied on specific, meaningful elements from Native American sources, which were still present in the final composition. Because of its significant role in inspiring Jonson’s abstract aesthetic, Rushing argued that Native American influences in the artists work could not simply be dismissed, as in Garman’s description, as “shorn of its original identity.”

Jonson addressed American Indian art as more than just a source of pictorial language, however. In his abstract paintings incorporating Indian design forms, he conveyed his impression of the religious significance of Native American art by referencing many of the same themes that he had in earlier works. Jonson’s abstracted appropriation of Native American design reflects his belief that the Indians of the Southwest were intimately attuned to the spiritual forces animating nature, and that they expressed this connection through their art.

⁹⁹ Jonson to Bertha Dutton, 8 Jun., 1973, quoted in Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde*, 85.

¹⁰⁰ Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde*, 81-82.

Some aspects of *Southwest Arrangement* correspond with Jonson's earlier works on Native American themes and participate in the same iconography, despite the image's abstract character. As Jonson recollected in a 1963 interview, he painted *Southwest Arrangement* in response to a feeling that there was "a connection between the landscape and certain aspects of Indian design."¹⁰¹ In his *Cliff Dwellings* series, Jonson emphasized the Indians' supposed closeness to the land as a marker of the ancient purity of their religion, as well as a source of physical and psychical power. Even though *Southwest Arrangement* is almost entirely abstract, Jonson included several references to the local landscape. The overall design patterns are superimposed over a gray-violet background with jagged triangular forms near the top that resemble mountain peaks—a second row repeats the theme behind and above in a lighter color, suggesting the effect of atmosphere on a distant mountain range. Near the center, a nearly monochrome panel seems to portray a mesa with either the sun or the moon half protruding behind it.

Further reiterating the theme of the Native Americans' connection to nature, Jonson replicated indigenous designs based on recognizable forms in the landscape. In *Southwest Arrangement*, he depicted stylized mountains, likely copied from Pueblo pottery designs; his student, Joe Herrera, recalled that Jonson studied Pueblo pottery, basketry, and textiles as he formulated his abstract compositions.¹⁰² An Ashiwi vessel similar to those that Jonson may have seen at the Museum of New Mexico includes the

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Van Deren Coke, *Raymond Jonson: a Retrospective Exhibition* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1964): 10.

¹⁰² Jackson Rushing, "Authenticity and Subjectivity in Post-War Painting: Concerning Herrera, Scholder, and Cannon," in *Shared Visions: Native American Painters and Sculptors in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Margaret Archuleta (Phoenix: Heard Museum, 1991), 14.

same motif, with a triangular mountain bisected by vertical lines (fig. 27).¹⁰³ Jonson's use of designs from traditional Pueblo pottery seems almost a direct response Edgar Hewett's challenge from the previous year; Hewett wrote that, through the study of these designs, "the ultra-modernists of to-day might find a true basis for a philosophy of art in which they seem as yet insecure."¹⁰⁴

Jonson painted *Southwest Arrangement* with a palate limited to colors that appear naturally in the landscape of northern New Mexico. This served to further establish the link Jonson drew between the land and its indigenous cultures by referencing a contemporary theme in the study and collecting of Native American art: the idea that "authentic" Indian products could only be created with materials native to the surrounding environment. Critics established the use of natural pigments as a criterion for judging the value of textiles and pottery, favoring objects either made before the introduction of synthetic dyes or manufactured using traditional methods and materials. Even in the early twentieth century, writers were reminiscing about the superiority of the older dyes. A description from 1912 noted that "the Navaho Indians of the West used to color their famous blankets with vegetable dyes, but when traders came to furnish the Indians with cheap mineral dyes, the value of their blankets and rugs speedily went down."¹⁰⁵ Jonson's use of the soft, light blues and greens, with a range of yellow, orange, and reddish-browns, limits *Southwest Arrangement* to the

¹⁰³ See Larry Frank and Francis H. Harlow, *Historic Pottery of the Pueblo Indians, 1600-1880* (Boston: Graphic Society, 1974), 139. The comparison is my own—Rushing did not illustrate any sources for this motif in *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde*.

¹⁰⁴ Hewett, *Ancient Life in the American Southwest*, 144.

¹⁰⁵ Albert G. Keller and Avard L. Bishop, *Commercial and Industrial Geography* (Boston: Ginn, 1912), 262.

colors that were seen as an authentic part of the Southwest Indians' art tradition, and emphasizes his conception of Native American art as expressing the Indian's closeness to nature.

Although individual elements of the painting can be read as symbolic, Jonson's appropriation of Native American abstract designs is itself a meta-symbol, representing his understanding of the potential that non-objective art held for conveying religious meaning. Hartel and Garman both acknowledged that *Southwest Arrangement* was one of his first attempts at non-representational art, and led ultimately to his development of "absolute painting."¹⁰⁶ As Garman wrote, "This type of abstraction, long antedating that of western art, caused him to wonder whether it had a contribution to make to his own kind of abstraction, and whether in one way or another it might become involved in his expanding theory of *design*."¹⁰⁷

"The Esoteric and Spiritual in Painting"

Though scholars have noted the importance of Native American art in Jonson's move toward abstraction, they have not explored the significance that it carried in his understanding of the religious potential of absolute painting. Jonson's study of Native American art and design, inflected by his interest in metaphysical traditions, led him to interpret the abstract character of Southwest Indian design in explicitly religious terms. He conceived of Native American art as ideal form of religious expression that exemplified the potential of abstract art to approach the Absolute and convey real spiritual meaning.

¹⁰⁶ Hartel, 224.

¹⁰⁷ Garman, *The Art of Raymond Jonson, Painter*, 70.

A crucial aspect of Theosophical discussions of art was the assumption that, just as ancient religions held spiritual knowledge that could elevate modern civilizations, primitive art possessed a means of expressing elemental truth that had been lost to the materialist cultures of the West. Katherine Tingley included a lengthy selection from Osvald Sirén's *Studies in Chinese and European Painting in the Theosophical Path*, from his chapter titled "Art and Religion." Sirén, who was a practicing Theosophist as well as a respected Finnish art historian, did not limit his discussion to Asian art, but wrote generally about the distinction between art from "spiritual" cultures and that produced by "materialistic" cultures, echoing Besant's description of materialist and spiritual art.¹⁰⁸ Sirén added to Besant's earlier work, though by proposing that this fundamental difference in approach was expressed by stylistic distinctions—while materialistic artists and their patrons "judge a work of art by the test of its likeness to nature," spiritually inclined artists relied on less naturalistic but more expressive modes of art.¹⁰⁹

In close accordance with Jonson's theory of "absolute painting," Sirén believed that abstraction was a better means of conveying spiritual ideals, and asserted that this was the reason that naturalism was a rarity in Asian art. He wrote, "abstract art could create designs whose emotional and spiritual significance is still unsurpassed... That which there found expression whether in picture, ornament, or architecture, is not simply a desire for ornamentation or representation but a creative will revealing an

¹⁰⁸ In addition to his numerous books and articles on Chinese art, Sirén authored a number of works on Theosophy, most of which were not related to his study of art. See, for example, "The Essential in Theosophy," *Theosophical Path* VI, no. 1 (Jan., 1914): 158-164, which explores the commonality between Theosophy and Christianity.

¹⁰⁹ Sirén, Osvald. "Art and Religion," from *Studies in Chinese and European Painting in Theosophical Path* XV (Jul.-Dec., 1918): 56-66.

inner reality.”¹¹⁰ Sirén postulated that art had begun to lose its spiritual grounding in the West shortly after the Renaissance, and that later art emphasized decoration rather than meaning: “The emotional and religious yeast [of the art of antiquity] was soon swept away in the flood of material desires and the pursuit of outward appearances... the Western world has almost forgotten that art may be a poetic creation capable of directly expressing spiritual and emotional impulses.”¹¹¹

The conception relating “primitive” art to abstraction was not limited to Theosophists, but also informed the critical discussion of modernist art on multiple levels. John Sloan came to appreciate Pueblo art as expressing similar ideas, through similar stylistic means, as modern Western painting. Beginning in 1919, he spent nearly every summer in New Mexico, and painted numerous images of the Pueblo.¹¹² Though Sloan and Jonson came to markedly different conclusions regarding painting styles, they agreed that the academic emphasis on illusionism was a negative influence in art. Both believed that ancient art from around the world demonstrated that abstraction was a more natural form of representation; as Sloan wrote, “The academic point of view is really a very modern sickness, and the so-called modern movement is more nearly related to the ancient art spirit of mankind.”¹¹³ Jonson echoed this sentiment in his own writing, opining that “The present is built on the past. Through the

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 57.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 62.

¹¹² See Grant Holcomb, “John Sloan in Santa Fe,” *American Art Journal* 10, no. 1 (May, 1978): 33-54.

¹¹³ Quoted in Wenger, *We Have a Religion*, 90. Sloan and Oliver La Farge organized the *Exposition of Indian Tribal Arts* in 1931, which they claimed was the “first exhibition of American Indian art selected entirely with consideration of aesthetic value.” See John Sloan and Oliver La Farge, *Introduction to American Indian Art* (Glorieta, NM: Rio Grande Press, 1970).

study and experience emotionally with works of the past, I cannot but feel that the so-called Modern Art is a natural continuation of the history of the spirit.”¹¹⁴

As many primitivists argued, cultures that were supposedly less developed actually maintained a more integral and healthy place for art in their societies compared with Western cultures. Sloan wrote that “The Indian artist deserves to be classed as a Modernist, his art is old, yet alive and dynamic; but his modernism is an expression of a continuing vigor seeking new outlets and not, like ours, a search for release from exhaustion.”¹¹⁵ The “continuing vigor” of Native American art, many interpreters believed, came from the consanguinity of art and religion in indigenous cultures. Hewett promoted this idea vigorously, arguing that “Religion, art, social structure, industries—all coalesce in daily life... [Native Americans’] fundamental belief is in all-pervading, deific power. This finds expression in dramatic ceremonial with musical accompaniment; in symbolism which dominates the performance of his drama dances, in color and design in his decorative arts...” He concluded, “utility and beauty, art and religion, were inseparable.”¹¹⁶ Jonson maintained a similar view of the ideal intimate relationship between art and religion, believing that his painting was by far the most important expression of his spirituality.¹¹⁷

In his understanding of the religious function of Native American art, however, Jonson diverged markedly from his associates in the Transcendental Painting Group,

¹¹⁴ Raymond Jonson, “Creativeness in Painting,” talk presented to the Art Club of Albuquerque, 1934, Raymond Jonson Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [RJ9:6331-6332].

¹¹⁵ Sloan and La Farge, 15.

¹¹⁶ Hewett, *Ancient Life in the American Southwest*, 52, 59.

¹¹⁷ See Hartel, 21-24.

especially Emil Bisttram. Although both artists believed that the Indians of the Southwest produced art reflective of an ancient and authentic religion, they disagreed about the means by which their art expressed religious truth. As I describe in chapter three, Bisttram saw Native American art as symbolic, representing pictorially specific aspects of their belief. Jonson, however, felt that the most important aspect of Native American art was its abstract character. In his interpretation, Indian art was meant to directly convey spiritual meaning through color and form, expressing emotional significance that no iconography could codify in symbolic form.

Jonson's most direct criticism of Bisttram's approach is preserved in notes from his art appreciation class in 1949, from a lecture entitled, "The Esoteric and Spiritual in Painting." The class focused on Pelton's work, which Jonson interpreted in a manner that considerably elucidates his own ideals of religious art. He discussed Pelton's *Wells of Jade*, 1931 (fig. 28), a painting that she had given him in 1934, which he considered "one of the finest American paintings extant."¹¹⁸ He wrote, "As far as I know [Pelton] does not, has not, and probably will not use the established occult symbols as working material or starting points for contemporary American painting." He continued by noting that he did not necessarily disapprove of any recognizable symbolism, but, he added, "on the one hand we have a physical interpretation of the physical like Bisttram and on the other hand here today we have a spiritual interpretation of the spiritual."¹¹⁹

Jonson suggested that Bisttram's work, despite its religious content, was limited to the physical realm because he conveyed meaning through the depiction of

¹¹⁸ Jonson to Rudhyar, 11 Dec., 1933, Raymond Jonson Archives.

¹¹⁹ Jonson, "The Esoteric and Spiritual in Painting," 1949, Raymond Jonson Archives.

recognizable objects. Even if the material things that Bisttram painted were meant to allude to spiritual concepts, the fact of his representational manner allowed his work to function only on the physical level of symbolic language. Two decades earlier, he had criticized Nicholas Roerich's work for similar reasons. He wrote to his brother, Arthur, "I myself prefer a work to have an inner symbol and not an outer one. In Roerich's case it is pretty much both and there is where we part."¹²⁰ Roerich's *Madonna Oriflamma*, 1932 (Fig. 29), exemplifies his approach; the painting includes numerous religious symbols and alludes to Asian and Western art traditions, creating a multivalent synthesis of transcultural religious imagery.¹²¹ Jonson understood Bisttram's art as expressing a similar aesthetic by depicting recognizable physical objects as symbols.

In contrast, as Jonson asserted, Pelton's *Wells of Jade* had no recognizable subject matter, and thus operated on a higher plane of signification, where emotional expressions of potential spiritual significance were articulated without any intermediary language, conveyed directly through the formal qualities of the paint on canvas. This process transcended any other form of religious art, Jonson believed, and facilitated Pelton's "spiritual interpretation of the spiritual." He wrote, "Some of us would go so far as to say that this is a much finer decoration for a church than a realistic painting of Christ, angels and cherubims. There have been, of course, many paintings of religious subjects with spiritual content, but there have been few abstract and semi-abstract paintings of material that seems to pertain to or from the same source as the

¹²⁰ Jonson to Arthur Johnson, 5 Dec., 1929, Raymond Jonson Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [RJ 1:339-340].

¹²¹ See Jacqueline Decter, *Nicholas Roerich: the Life and Art of a Russian Master* (Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 1989) for an exploration of Roerich's symbolism.

religious.”¹²² Jonson argued that, unlike traditional symbolic religious paintings, whose meanings might eventually fade, Pelton’s work would never lose its significance. As he expressed, “It should be considered beauty 10,000 years ago, today, and 10,000 years from now. There are no styles to affect it, no changes, anything to affect it unless something happens to the cosmos... In other words, I am saying that this contains a universal symbolic message.”¹²³

Jonson recognized that Pelton’s art was not completely non-objective, as it still retained some relation to forms that could be encountered in nature—he allowed that “she probably had some very, very definite ideas pertaining to certain occult symbolism.”¹²⁴ He overlooked the painting’s potentially referential “outer” symbolism, however, because he felt that Pelton had kept it private, disavowing any imagery that might appear to her audience as obviously symbolic. Again in reference to Roerich’s work, he wrote, “Painting is not the means of defining a religion—it is rather one of itself.”¹²⁵

Pictographical Compositions

Jonson fashioned his theory of absolute painting as an attempt to avoid symbolism altogether by omitting any reference to physical form, and he looked, ironically, to prehistoric Native American art as a model. In 1946-1947, Jonson

¹²² Jonson, “The Esoteric and Spiritual in Painting.”

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Jonson to Arthur Johnson, 5 Dec., 1929, Raymond Jonson Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [RJ 1:339-340].

produced a series he called *Pictographic Compositions*.¹²⁶ These paintings, he claimed, were his own abstractions, not versions of actual Southwest Indian rock art:

They present little if any clue as to what they are based on. The title is the only clue and it may be misleading for it could be taken to mean a particular pictograph or petroglyph which is not the case. It is simply an emotional organization established in *design* terms upon thinking of pictographs and petroglyphs in general.¹²⁷

Jonson's assertion that the *Pictographical Compositions* were not related to any specific sources in Ancient Native American art may have been an attempt to avoid any suggestion that his work was not completely original. Jonson's thoughts on the formal aspects of pictographs and petroglyphs, however, clearly evince an encounter with actual ancient rock art. Many of the compositions in this series do, in fact, resemble Native American designs.¹²⁸

In *Pictographical Composition No. 7*, 1946 (Fig. 30) Jonson painted a bright red-orange circle in a ground of deep purple, and then inscribed two concentric circles and a jagged running figure of fused arcs over the surface. Contained entirely within the orange circle, a smaller white linear form mimics the movement of the larger one. Two smaller circles of contrasting purple tints frame the composition on the right and left sides of the canvas. Rushing related *Pictographical Composition No. 7* to a Mimbres bowl in the collection of the Maxwell Museum of Anthropology at the

¹²⁶ The Pictographical Compositions series originally included seventeen paintings. As Rushing noted in *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde*, 84, a number of these works have been lost, including *Pictographical Composition No. 6*, which Jonson gifted to the Museum of Navajo Ceremonial Art.

¹²⁷ Jonson to Reginald Fisher, 10 Mar, 1956, Raymond Jonson Archives.

¹²⁸ Rushing noted this fact in *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde*, 84, but did not elaborate on how they specifically relate to forms from petroglyphs, or provide any examples. His discussion focused on stylistic connections to patterns in prehistoric pottery decoration.

University of New Mexico (fig. 31), suggesting that painting evokes a “linear design that has been ‘liberated’ from the circular confines of the bowl it decorates.”¹²⁹

The composition also shares formal similarities with petroglyphs visible in northern New Mexico, with a mix of carefully delineated geometric shapes and erratically incised lines. After moving to Albuquerque, Jonson lived within a short distance of what is now Petroglyph National Monument, a ridge of exposed volcanic boulders on which prehistoric Native Americans carved thousands of images, in a wide array of styles and forms.¹³⁰ Jonson likely visited the park, which remains a major attraction in the Albuquerque area. Whether he painted in reference to specific petroglyphs that he encountered there, or at the hundreds of other sites where they are visible throughout the Southwest, various paintings in the *Pictographical Compositions* series evoke different forms characteristic of prehistoric Native American rock art.

Pictographical Composition No. 3, 1946 (fig. 32), for example, resembles so-called “map” petroglyphs, in which a pattern of seemingly unrelated shapes and lines are contained within a rectangle, as in examples from Petroglyph National Monument (fig. 33-fig. 34). Jonson adapted the general form to his own aesthetic, bending the geometric shapes into flowing, dynamic forms. In *Pictographical Composition No. 9*, 1946 (fig. 35), Jonson arranged three amorphous ovoid shapes over a background of solid yellow, purple, and red, all of which seem to flow up from the bottom of the canvas. A transparent green seems to run down from the top, combining with the colors

¹²⁹ Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde*, 84.

¹³⁰ Jonson was forced to move to Albuquerque during the Second World War, as a tire shortage meant that he could no longer commute to the University of New Mexico from his home in Santa Fe. See Jonson to Pelton, 2 Jun., 1942, Raymond Jonson Archives.

underneath to create a range of dark, murky tones. The superimposed shapes read like islands in a sea, or like mountain peaks on a topographical map, a sense heightened by the fine lines that Jonson inscribed around each of the forms. Another set of lines cross in the background, establishing parallel vertical and horizontal coordinates that add to the overall cartographic effect.

By referencing the “map” petroglyphs of the Southwest, *Pictographical Composition No. 3* and *No. 9* emphasize Jonson’s understanding of the Native American’s connection to the land. A common conception in the early twentieth century was that many petroglyphs were actually produced as maps, showing trails and hunting grounds within the features of the landscape.¹³¹ Map petroglyphs were taken as evidence of the Indians’ intimate knowledge of the landscape, which, as I discuss above, was claimed by metaphysical writers to be the source of their alleged mastery of the powers of nature. Jonson described his contemplation of the inestimable depth of the Indians’ relationship with the landscape as a profoundly moving experience, a “feeling of complete chemical change...”¹³² Addressing similar themes as his earlier *Cliff Dwellings* series, Jonson’s *Pictographical Compositions* express his conception of the Native Americans’ complete integration of lifestyle and landscape, a harmonious, natural existence that allowed for a knowledge of the spiritual forces underlying the cycles of nature.

In addition, Jonson’s *Pictographical Compositions* reflect the physical character of the rock art at Petroglyph National Monument, where artisans chiseled their designs

¹³¹ For a contemporary critical discussion of this issue, see *Annual Report of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution* (Washington DC: Smithsonian, 1937), 420.

¹³² Jonson, talk presented to the Chili Club, 29 Aug., 1949.

into the rock, removing the darkened surface of the stone to expose the lighter color underneath. Since the petroglyphs were carved, unlike painted pictographs, they could only work with the two natural colors of the rock. In several of his *Pictographical Compositions*, Jonson depicted light colors in solid planes superimposed over darker colors, giving a similar visual effect. In *Pictographical Compositions No. 3, No. 7, and No. 12*, 1947 (fig. 36), Jonson used a light color for the outermost background, with a much darker, roughly rectangular shape placed in front. The effect resembles the solitary dark stones at Petroglyph National Monument on which the artists carved their designs. The deep, rich hues of Jonson's backgrounds are not quite black, but reflect some of the purplish luster of the stone surfaces, a coating of clay particles and minerals that give the rock a dark sheen.

Not only do Jonson's *Pictographical Compositions* evince the artist's reflection on the formal aspects of the petroglyphs with which he was familiar—they also demonstrate his interest in the indigenous artisans' techniques and materials. Jonson referred to this specific aspect of the series as a direct reference to rock art: "The physical connection is the use of the incised line and the admixture of sand with the paint in certain shapes."¹³³ A common theme in the *Pictographical Compositions* series is the use of white lines, which Jonson produced by physically etching them into the finished painting, literally scraping through the thick layers of impasto.¹³⁴ The effect, as Jonson acknowledged, was meant to mimic the surface of a petroglyph design; numerous images at Petroglyph National Monument are composed of thin lines etched

¹³³ Jonson to Reginald Fisher, 10 Mar. 1956, Raymond Jonson Archives.

¹³⁴ Traugott and Blankenship describe Jonson's technique in *Symbolizing New Mexico*.

deeply into the surface of the rock, and some of these appear in conjunction with the wider, flat shapes, as in a boulder photographed from the side, showing the depth of the incised spiral shape (fig. 37).

Jonson also attempted to replicate the visual effect of rock art by mixing sand with his paint in some of the images, as in the ovoid forms in *Pictographical Composition No. 9*, and by building up deep impasto surfaces textured by a coarse brush, as in the dark purple mid-background in *Pictographical Composition No. 7*. In *Pictographical Composition No. 17*, 1947, (fig. 38), Jonson employed an airbrush to create the background, spraying small circular patches of granular color in a mix of yellow, blue, and red that create an impression of variegated purple-gray from a distance, and suggest a sandy texture. The finishes resulting from these varied techniques reflect the character of the stone on which the images at Petroglyph National Monument were carved. In addition, the obvious depth of the paint in the *Pictographical Compositions*, difficult to appreciate in a reproduction, is a striking feature that gives the paintings a definite sense of physicality and suggests the dense heaviness of rock.

Jonson's use of petroglyphs for models might seem to depart from his proscription against any kind of symbolic form, as the original carvings were laden with religious significance. Jonson's contemporaries who addressed ancient rock art in their work often focused on its symbolic potential. Adolph Gottlieb produced his own *Pictographs* series in 1941-1951, including *Pictograph-Symbol*, 1942 (fig. 39), which, as Rushing described, is clearly based on images published in *Indian Art of the United*

States, the catalog for a major exhibition at the Museum of Modern art in 1941.¹³⁵

Though Gottlieb was interested in the formal character of pictographs and petroglyphs, even, like Jonson, painting with rough surfaces meant to evoke the feel of rock, he was captivated by their symbolic potential. Rushing characterized these works as an “attempt to redeem the darkness of the war years by bringing to the surface the atavistic roots of modern experience.”¹³⁶ Jackson Pollock also painted images directly related to Native American rock art, many in the years immediately before Jonson began his *Pictographical Compositions* series. Rushing described Pollock’s response to pictographic imagery he encountered in his youth in Arizona and at the *Indian Art of the United States* exhibition as a “shamanic kind of self-discovery,” quoting from Indian art elements that he interpreted as symbols from an “archaic consciousness.”¹³⁷

Though Jonson was not personally acquainted with Gottlieb or Pollock and made no mention of either artist in any of his preserved papers, it is possible that he had seen reproductions of their work prior to beginning his own *Pictographical Compositions*. Whether or not Jonson was aware of Gottlieb and Pollock’s work, he took a dramatically different approach to the subject, claiming that his own images were not symbolic in any way, but non-objective compositions that arose from “thinking of pictographs and petroglyphs in general.”¹³⁸ Jonson believed that the abstract design qualities of ancient Native American rock art could stand apart from any meanings that their original artists may have intended, and provide a model for non-objective art.

¹³⁵ Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde*, 161-163.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 165.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 173, 189.

¹³⁸ Jonson to Reginald Fisher, 10 Mar., 1956, Raymond Jonson Archives.

Jonson's interpretation of ancient rock art in completely formal terms was not without precedent. René d'Harnoncourt and Frederic H. Douglas's exhibition, *Indian Art of the United States* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, 1941, had elicited considerable commentary on the apparent relationship between ancient Native American art and modernism.¹³⁹ Visitors to the exhibition were specifically invited to consider the similarity between modernist art and Native American art in a section of the exhibition called "Indian art and modern living." As one reviewer observed, the exhibition showed that the Indians of the Southwest "expressed themselves in pure design," terms that seem remarkably similar to Jonson's ideal of "absolute painting."¹⁴⁰ In the catalog, Douglas described pictographs as encompassing a wide stylistic range, but noted that some of the abstract examples demonstrate the ancient Indians' highly developed sense of composition.¹⁴¹

The exhibition's conceptual framework for considering Native American art in reference to modernist abstraction was not entirely original, as Rushing noted, but was enormously influential.¹⁴² Beverly Gordon and Melanie Herzog discussed the effect that this purported affinity had on the collection of Native American art: whereas early twentieth century collections were limited almost exclusively to ethnographic and

¹³⁹ See Jackson Rushing, "Marketing the Affinity of the Primitive and the Modern: René d'Harnoncourt and "Indian Art of the United States," in *The Early Years of Native American Art History*, ed. Janet Berlo, 191-236 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992). In some sense, the show presaged *Primitivism in 20th Century Art* at the Museum of Modern Art, but in keeping with the character of contemporary scholarship, very little criticism was directed at the exhibition's characterization of Native American art as expressing the same psychological underpinnings as well as formal aspects of modernist art.

¹⁴⁰ George C. Vaillant, "Indian Art of the United States: an Exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art," *Art Bulletin* 23, no. 2 (Jun., 1941): 168.

¹⁴¹ Frederic H. Douglas and René d'Harnoncourt, *Indian Art of the United States* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1941), 114.

¹⁴² Rushing, "Marketing the Affinity of the Primitive and the Modern," 192-193.

archaeological institutions, fine arts museums and galleries began incorporating American Indian pieces into their permanent collections in the period immediately following the exhibition.¹⁴³ As H. W. Janson wrote, *Indian Art of the United States* clearly demonstrated that “Indian art, several adverse opinions notwithstanding, would seem to be a perfectly legitimate subject for the Museum of Modern Art.”¹⁴⁴ This conception linking ancient Native American art and modernist abstraction continues into the present; Kathleen Whittaker wrote in 2002 that “pictographs and petroglyphs in caves and on rock faces are not only the first paintings this continent produced but also the first American paintings in which abstract style and impressions, now commonly associated with contemporary art, were developed to an advanced degree.”¹⁴⁵

The apparent relationship between traditional Native American cultural products and modernist art, however, obscures the depths of social, religious, and cultural meaning caught up in the former. Even contemporary observers balked at admitting too close a correspondence between the disparate realms of art. Janson admitted that the visual beauty of Native American art justified its place in a modern art museum, but he cautioned:

...in our acknowledging our indebtedness to modern art, we must at the same time be careful not to interpret it too exclusively by reference to primitive art, or vice versa... it tends to obscure the fundamental difference of total content hidden behind the formal resemblance of the two. The same graphic sign used

¹⁴³ Beverly Gordon and Melanie Herzog, *American Indian Art: the Collecting Experience* (Madison, WI: Chasen Museum of Art, 2002), 11.

¹⁴⁴ H. W. Janson, Review of *Indian Art of the United States*, by Frederic Douglas and René d’Harnoncourt, *Parnassus* 13, no. 3 (Mar., 1941): 117.

¹⁴⁵ Kathleen Whittaker, Introduction to *Indian Painters of the Southwest: the Deep Remembering*, ed. Katherin L. Chase (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2002), 10.

in different contexts may in one instance be a symbol of animistic magic, in the other a transcription of a subtle personal philosophy.¹⁴⁶

Janson's warning, though seemingly prescient of the postcolonial theory that would reinterpret the discourse of primitivism later in the twentieth century, was a rare departure from the celebratory accounts of Native Americans as natural and innate modernists.¹⁴⁷

Jonson recognized the cultural significance that pictographs and petroglyphs held for the people who had produced them, but only to explicitly discount that realm of meaning as having influenced his own work, asserting that the *Pictographical Compositions* were "Jonson pictographs, not Indian."¹⁴⁸ Perhaps the ancient rock art seemed a better subject, in this respect, than anything created by modern Native Americans, since whatever meaning the works had originally held had, in most cases, been lost over the centuries. As Douglas wrote, "The many attempts to read meanings in pictographs have met with little success... the significance which most pictographs may have had has been lost to us. All except modern ones are too old to come within the knowledge of living Indians."¹⁴⁹ Despite the intent of the original artists, Jonson recognized that petroglyphs, especially those made up of seemingly abstract designs, were essentially free of any meaning.

¹⁴⁶ Janson, 117.

¹⁴⁷ It is important to note that critics who linked Native American and modernist art styles often did so with the best of intentions; d'Harnoncourt was a member of the Indian Arts and Crafts Board, and hoped that Indian Art of the United States would increase demand for Native American-made goods, and ultimately improve economic conditions on Indian reservations. See Rushing, "Marketing the Affinity of the Primitive and the Modern."

¹⁴⁸ Jonson to Bertha Dutton, 8 Jun., 1973, quoted in Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde*, 85.

¹⁴⁹ Douglas and d'Harnoncourt, 115.

Despite the fact that the pictographs' symbolic interpretations had been lost, they still carried important cultural meaning, significance that Jonson must have been aware of as he composed his *Pictographical Compositions* series. *Pictographical Composition No. 12*, for example, is related to petroglyphs that depict highly stylized plant and animal forms. The three brightly colored shapes, composed of un-modeled, flat color, suggest the forms that indigenous artists had used to represent birds, butterflies, and other animals, as in examples from Petroglyph National Monument (fig. 40-41). These images, contemporary anthropologists argued, were meant to capture the power of the animal they portrayed.¹⁵⁰ In fact, the entire medium of rock art was associated with ceremonial use. As Angus Quinlan and Alanah Woody have written, petroglyphs were a complex mode of social signification that could express social-geographical identification at the same time as serving a ritual purpose in "hunting magic" or representing "shamanic metaphors."¹⁵¹

Jonson may have associated the ritualistic significance of rock art with his conception of the Indians' psychical abilities, rooted in their unique understanding of natural forces. As Ellwood had written, primitive cultures were able to harness and utilize these forces through their art—they could "wield effectively... the power behind the glowing forms made by the cave-artist's brush."¹⁵² Theosophical writer C. J. Ryan argued that cave paintings expressed a "higher intelligence, a hidden spirit in Nature," that came from the artists' religious approach, as such paintings were not simply

¹⁵⁰ See Campbell Grant, *The Rock Art of the North American Indians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 26.

¹⁵¹ See Angus R. Quinlan and Alanah Woody, "Marks of Distinction: Rock Art and Ethnic Identification in the Great Basin," *American Antiquity* 68, no. 2 (Apr., 2003): 372-390.

¹⁵² Ellwood, 181.

attempts to create beautiful images, but were involved in powerful rituals. Furthermore, Ryan continued, they evinced an advanced spiritual knowledge that had been lost to artists of the West, suggesting a connection with the previous root race. “When archaeologists obtain knowledge of the submerged civilizations of the lost Atlantis... the lost keys to the comprehension of the mysterious art ability of ‘prehistoric man of the Paleolithic Age’ will come to light...”¹⁵³

Petroglyphs and pictographs were believed to have had similar ritual uses, meant to invoke the “hidden spirit in Nature” in archaic religious practices. And, the ancient artists that produced them were alleged to belong to the same Atlantean root race as those who had painted the cave paintings that Ryan admired. Jonson’s *Pictographical Compositions* allude to the religious function of rock art, rather than its symbolic nature, suggesting that the true power in the image arose from its expression of “magical” purpose, in Rudhyar’s terminology, as it was meant to produce actual spiritual results rather than merely refer to a specific religious concept.¹⁵⁴ Jonson’s understanding of the religious significance of petroglyphs demonstrates the affinity that he saw between Native American art and his own conception of absolute painting. Instead of describing ideas *about* religion through symbols, Jonson meant his art to effect a spiritual experience. Jonson read petroglyphs as expressing the same aesthetic, allowing the ancient artists of the Southwest to create images with religious power, rather than just symbolic significance.

¹⁵³ C. J. Ryan, “Ancient Methods of Painting,” *Theosophical Path* XXIII (Jul.-Dec., 1922): 534-539.

¹⁵⁴ See Rudhyar, *The Transcendental Movement in Painting*, 12.

Jonson's use of ancient, rather than contemporary American Indian art as models also reflects the common conception that the Pueblos' ancestors were actually much more spiritually advanced than the modern Indians. As did his *Cliff Dwellings* series, the *Pictographical Compositions* associate lofty religious wisdom with the ancient Indians of the Southwest, not the contemporary Pueblo people. A widespread conception maintained that the modern Indian cultures were the result of a lengthy downward trajectory beginning with the first contact with Europeans; critics of Native American art frequently relied on this model. H. W. Janson celebrated the "primitive" art included in *Indian Art of the United States*, but opined that the "examples of contemporary Indian painting are the only objects in the whole exhibition that appear lame and anemic." He continued, "Our own existence finds a truer echo in the ferocious expressiveness of that Indian art which still bears the stamp of a prehistoric tribal civilization forever lost through the advent of the White Man."¹⁵⁵

Dane Rudhyar agreed, noting that very little modern Indian art, in his estimation, still merited the appellation, "magical." Instead, it was merely "decorative." As he wrote, "Figures which had magical character and were either never reproduced in painting or weaving, or only reproduced on sacred objects for ritualistic use, are now drawn everywhere for sale to an alien race."¹⁵⁶ In fact, he claimed that modern Indian art could not even be considered abstract:

...they are based on the decorative use of traditional symbols. They are made merely to embellish surfaces, without any effort on the part of the artist to "abstract from" the data of his sense experience essential or temporarily emphasized characteristics. And without such effort there is no real abstract art.

¹⁵⁵ Janson, 117.

¹⁵⁶ Rudhyar, *The Transcendental Movement in Painting*, 21.

It is only decorative art based on traditional patterns handled in a traditional way and without individual effort at abstraction.¹⁵⁷

Rudhyar asserted that ancient Native American artists had created vital, individualistic, and dynamic abstract art, whereas their modern descendents merely reproduced old design motifs as a way of decorating surfaces. In Rudhyar's view, Southwest Indians had lost the cultural knowledge necessary to produce authentic "magical" art, and their work no longer exemplified religiously meaningful abstraction. He claimed that Jonson eventually lost interest in Indian art because he realized that "subservience to the Indian tradition would bear no valid fruit."¹⁵⁸

Rudhyar and Jonson differed in at least one respect, as Jonson went on to produce his *Pictographical Compositions* series several years after Rudhyar made the preceding remarks.¹⁵⁹ Jonson, however, does seem to have avoided referencing contemporary Native American cultures or arts in any of his works. Only the design motifs in *Southwest Arrangement* seem related to the modern Indian arts that Rudhyar described as "decorative," and even they were more likely copied from nineteenth century models, rather than contemporary products.¹⁶⁰ Jonson's *Pictographical Compositions* celebrate Native American artists as having developed a religiously meaningful mode of abstract painting that predated the similar work of modernist artists

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Rudhyar completed his manuscript for *The Transcendental Movement in Painting* in 1938, and Jonson produced the *Pictographical Compositions* series in 1946-1947.

¹⁶⁰ The Jonsons' collection of Indian artifacts, like many at the time, focused on historical rather than modern pieces, which were thought to be lesser quality in materials and execution. See Beverly Gordon, "Collecting Indian Art: the Historical Context," in *American Indian Art: the Collecting Experience* (Madison, WI: Elvehjem Museum of Art, 1988).

by millennia, but their reference to ancient rather than modern Indian art relegated modern American Indians to an inferior position.

The Politics of Synthesis in Jonson's Work

Following the metaphysical texts that he studied, Jonson believed that the Native Americans of the Southwest possessed not just wisdom, but actual physical and psychical power that came through their unparalleled knowledge of the natural process of the surrounding environment. As Jonson formulated an ideal aesthetic for religious art, he looked to Native American art as an example. Their art, he held, expressed this power, and operating as a direct means of conveying religious meaning; like the best modern art it could, in his words, “move directly into the spiritual.”¹⁶¹

He interpreted Indian art, however, through his own conception of the potential power of abstract art, believing that only non-objective art allowed for the direct conveyance of spiritually meaningful emotion. Jonson judged Southwest Indian art using the same criteria, selectively appropriating from abstract forms in pottery, basketry, and textiles, and ignoring the figurative and obviously symbolic art that also plays important cultural roles. Likewise, he chose to reference ancient rock art because any meanings that the images might have had were long lost, leaving images that he could celebrate for their abstract character, rather than their original signficatory purpose.

Jonson's conception of Native American art was dramatically limited by his subjective interpretative strategy. In fact, many of the motifs that he interpreted as abstract decoration are actually richly symbolic in American Indian art traditions. The

¹⁶¹ Jonson, talk presented to the Chili Club, 29 Aug., 1949.

design elements in Pueblo cultural products, especially, carry specific meanings to the people who produced them; as his contemporary, anthropologist Ruth Bunzel, asserted of Pueblo art, “every design is significant.”¹⁶²

Jonson intended his selective appropriation to demonstrate the connections he perceived between American Indian art and his own model of absolute painting. In effect, however, his references to Indian design motifs and ancient rock art evince the dramatic disparity between Jonson’s and the Native American artists’ intentions.

Jonson’s insistence that these works spoke on a universal level obscured the messages that they were originally meant to convey on a cultural level, and stripped symbolic forms of their intended meanings. Ultimately, Jonson’s synthesis of Native American and modernist styles only allowed Indian art to speak through Jonson’s own modernist vocabulary.

¹⁶² Ruth Bunzel, *The Pueblo Potter: a Study of Creative Imagination in Primitive Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1929), 69.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

Like many of their contemporaries, Agnes Pelton, Emil Bisttram, and Raymond Jonson each believed that modernism had the potential to revolutionize religious art. Academic realism, they agreed, had created a materialist art that allowed for no genuine expression of spirituality. Pelton dismissed art “destined for churches or shrines” as vapid and unfeeling; Jonson considered Pelton’s abstract art “much finer decoration for a church than a realistic painting of Christ, angels and cherubims.”¹ As the world moved toward the dawn of a new age, modern artists would be on the forefront, helping to create new forms of expression that allowed for a closer, more direct experience of the spiritual forces underlying the physical world.

Their various backgrounds in metaphysical religion, however, suggested that the art of the coming era, like the religion of the new age, would not be a radical reversal that disavowed earlier ideals. Rather, it would synthesize the best elements of ancient traditions in an attempt to create a complete compendium of truth, which was presently scattered, as Theosophists believed, among all of the world’s cultures. Bisttram, Jonson, and Pelton focused on the future in their art, but drew on the past, recognizing that wisdom from earlier eras was essential in the ongoing evolution of the world. Humanity, in their understanding, could not advance forward without maintaining

¹ Pelton, “Statement for Agnes Pelton Paintings”; Jonson, “The Esoteric and Spiritual in Painting.”

knowledge learned over eons; they conceived of the evolutionary process as expressed in accumulative changes, not radical breaks.²

Bisttram, Jonson, and Pelton were united by the belief that the Native Americans of the Southwest possessed ancient wisdom that would prove instrumental in the development of the civilization of the new era. They were spurred by the Theosophical and post-Theosophical literature that associated Indians with the lost continent of Atlantis, and by the incipient New Age discourse that heralded their advanced psychical powers. Drawn to the Southwest in search of this knowledge, they each encountered Native American cultures in a diverse range of circumstances, and fashioned images that reflect both their idealistic presuppositions and their actual experiences with American Indians.

Pelton conceived of Native American cultural practices, arts, and religions as remnants of a worldwide ancient culture, preserving vestiges of the Atlantean civilization. Her images allude to Indians in subtle references linking them with a generalized spiritual antiquity. Nevertheless, they occupied a key position in her religious conception, as they were the ancient inhabitants of the Southwest deserts, the region where she felt the closest connection to the cosmic forces animating nature.

Bisttram drew from many of the same sources as Pelton, but approached Native American cultures much more directly in his work. He attended numerous Pueblo and Hopi ceremonial dances, and interpreted them as expressing the same set of core “universal” truths promoted by Theosophy. His paintings depict the dances as expressing the cyclical evolution of the universe, propitiating the natural forces that

² See Blavatsky, *Key to Theosophy*, 215-216.

were responsible for the growth of crops, on a local level, and for the ongoing process of creation, on a cosmic level.

Jonson also regularly visited the Pueblos of northern New Mexico, as well as archeological sites once occupied by the Ancestral Puebloans. Relying on metaphysical texts, he came to understand the Indians as possessing advanced spiritual powers, psychical as well as physical abilities that gave them command of natural forces as yet unknown to science. In his art, he emphasized the Indian's closeness to nature as the source of their transcendent spirituality. A persistent theme in Jonson's images on Native American subjects is his conception of their integral relationship to the surrounding landscape, living in inexpressibly close harmony with nature.

More than just interpreting Native American cultures through metaphysical texts, however, all three artists understood Southwest Indian art as a model for a religiously meaningful aesthetic. Each developed different conceptions of what form ideal religious painting would take, based, in part, on diverse interpretations of Native American art. Pelton saw American Indian art, like all ancient art, as depicting "elemental motifs" related to archetypal images in the universal consciousness. The most important role of art, she believed, was to allow access to this "universal" realm, the source of all spiritual knowledge. She meant her own abstractions to function as she believed Indian art did, eliciting the viewer to enter a contemplative state where they might experience the same revelatory experience that had inspired the artist.

Bisttram also believed that archetypal images could convey important religious meaning, but he developed an aesthetic which communicated through symbols. Though he did employ specific symbolic forms appropriated from Pueblo ceremonial art, he

recognized abstraction as the means to replicate the “architectural principles” governing cosmic creation.³ Bisttram interpreted Native American art as operating in the same manner, conveying the “spirit of man’s inner nature” through geometrical abstraction.⁴

Jonson formulated an ideal religious art that he called “absolute painting.” He described non-objective art as speaking through “spiritual potentiality,” directly conveying emotional expressions with potentially profound religious significance.⁵ American Indian art, he asserted, communicated with the same abstract immediacy, without the need of any intermediary symbolic language. Jonson’s conception of non-representational design in Southwest Indian cultures informed his own aesthetic; he looked to Indian art as a model of religiously meaningful abstract art.

A common theme in all three artists’ work is the inability or unwillingness to interpret Native American art according to the intentions of the original artists. Jonson and Pelton emphasized the abstract character of Southwest Indian art, and failed to recognize the specific meanings that individual design motifs carried within specific cultures. Bisttram understood Pueblo art and ceremonialism as richly symbolic, but interpreted the symbols in the terms of metaphysical religion, an ill-fitting imposition of foreign meaning that obscured its original religious significance.

This was partly a result of the limited access that any of the artists had to Native American cultures; though Pelton was familiar with members of the Cahuilla tribe, and Jonson and Bisttram both attended numerous Pueblo ceremonial dances, they were

³ Quoted in Hunt, 1.

⁴ Quoted in Wiggins, 25.

⁵ See Jonson, “The Non-Objective in Painting.”

never in close enough proximity to learn about the real significance of art within these cultures. Like many other observers who approached Native American groups expecting to learn secret wisdom, they failed to recognize that religion is not a discreet category of knowledge, but an experiential phenomenon involving multiple layers of cultural meaning, expressed in various forms of signification.⁶ As they observed Indian dances and viewed Indian art, the artists of the Transcendental Painting Group relied on their own preconceptions about Native American cultures for an interpretative framework. The art they produced as a result of these encounters gives almost no voice to the original artists, presenting forms appropriated from American Indian traditions, but stripped of their initial significance.

A related theme in Bisttram, Jonson, and Pelton's art is the conception that the modern Indian nations were only relics of a once-great civilization, and that their distant ancestors possessed even greater wisdom and held more advanced spiritual powers. In many respects, their images on Native American themes that seem superficially laudatory actually follow in the contemporary discourse that characterized American Indians as the downtrodden and debased remnants of an originally exemplary society. Rather than depicting the present-day Indians that they knew and worked with, Pelton and Jonson referred in their art to the ancient cultures of the Southwest, focusing on ruins, archaeological specimens, and petroglyphs. Bisttram portrayed contemporary dancers, but accepted the conception that they were, for the most part, unaware of the original significance of the ceremonies.

⁶ See Lisa Aldred's criticism of facile interpretations of Native American religions in "Plastic Shamans and Astroturf Sundances," esp. 329-334.

In their synthesis of Western and American Indian art forms, Bisttram, Jonson, and Pelton nearly always subsumed Native Americans' ideas about art and religion underneath their own interpretations, occluding the original significance of Indian art behind metaphysical formulations. Their work fits historian Carrie Bramen's conception of syncretism "from above," in which Western power structures maintained both their identity and their preeminence by advocating limited forms of transculturation.⁷ Proponents of "hegemonic syncretism" accepted the incorporation of ideas from other systems of belief, but only to an extent that would not threaten their own cultural boundaries or allow other groups a position of power.

The result of the Transcendental Painting Group's encounter with the Native Americans of the Southwest was an art that lauded Indian cultures, but ultimately maintained the interpretative authority of metaphysical religions. Bisttram, Jonson, and Pelton each appropriated from American Indian traditions under their own conditions, evincing the unspoken presupposition that they held a superior ability to interpret the religious ideas of other cultures. And, as each of them believed that the world was on the cusp of a dramatic new evolutionary stage, they saw their work as exemplifying the future of religious expression in the new age. Indian art, in their combinative approach, was an important source, but one that was centered in the past, not the future.

This new interpretation of the work of the Transcendental Painting Group demonstrates the degree to which modernist art in the United States was imbricated in the discourses of cultural politics. Bisttram, Jonson, and Pelton's aesthetic theories were not detached considerations of the formal elements of composition, but were

⁷ Bramen, 276-277.

intimately involved in contemporary debates about race and religion, issues of weighty social import. They looked to metaphysical religious sources not only as a philosophical framework for their aesthetic strategies, but for interpretations of the indigenous cultural practices and art forms that they encountered in New Mexico.

Opportunities abound for further scholarly investigation of the cultural significance of metaphysical religion in twentieth century American modernism. The religious content of a wide range of modernist art has been overlooked by art historians; while the religious motives of certain artists have been thoroughly explored, the work of others for whom metaphysical sources were of crucial importance has been interpreted almost exclusively in formalist terms. Theosophy and other forms of metaphysical religion, however, provided artists with particular and identifiable interpretations of the relationship between art and religion, the ideal role of art in society, and contested conceptions of racial “difference” and cultural evolution. Accounts that attend to the influence of metaphysical religious texts, themes, and imagery will provide a richer understanding of the cultural contexts of modernist art in America.

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