ABSTRACT ART AS “BY-PRODUCT OF ASTRAL MANIFESTATION”: THE INFLUENCE OF THEOSOPHY ON MODERN ART IN EUROPE

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Introduction

Non-objective [abstract] art, (…) was, according to modern art authorities, a German innovation and began in Munich with Kandinsky. Actually, non-objective art began with Annie Besant and Leadbeater in the early 1900s. It is a by-product of astral manifestation as revealed by Theosophy, spiritualism, and occultism.1

That abstract art was originally a “by-product” of Theosophy2 and occultism is but one of many striking claims Robsjohn-Gibbings makes in Mona Lisa’s Mustache: A Dissection of Modern Art (1947). At the time of his writing, his reference to Theosophy, spiritualism, and occultism in concert with art went completely against the grain: modern art’s relationship with, for example, Theosophy was rarely if ever acknowledged. It was only in the 1960s, when groundbreaking works on the Theosophical inspiration of key abstract artists such as Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian were published, that the relationship was at least acknowledged. Certain pioneering exhibitions since then have further paved the way.3

Still, even today Robsjohn-Gibbings’ claim obviously goes against the grain. Abstract art is certainly not viewed as a “by-product of astral manifestation.” Nevertheless, there is something to the statement. Occultism and spiritualism extended a profound influence over art currents from the

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1 Robsjohn-Gibbings 1947: 150–151. In this work the author traces the apparently far-reaching influence of “occultism” and “other superstition” upon modern art.

2 To distinguish Christian theosophy in a more general sense from the Theosophy of the Theosophical Society, the latter is capitalized.

end of the nineteenth century to the Interbellum. The single most important esoteric influence upon the avant-garde was Theosophy, the focus of this chapter, and Robsjohn-Gibbings was correct in pointing out the importance of Theosophy, and Theosophists Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater, for abstract art. As will become clear below, Theosophy profoundly influenced the language of abstract forms created by early abstract artists as well as their vision of the purpose of art. But contrary to Robsjohn-Gibbings' claim, the relationship between art and Theosophy neither originated nor ended with Besant, Leadbeater, and Kandinsky. Rudolf Steiner clearly envisioned a role for art in the Theosophical (and later Anthroposophical) scheme of things, and several artists were influenced by his ideas. Well before Steiner, already in the time of Blavatsky, Theosophy was influencing certain art currents. While the Theosophical influence extends over quite some time, it is notable that the language of abstract art originated only well after the 1800s. Besant and Leadbeater’s book *Thought-Forms* (1901), although not the beginning of abstract art, may well have played a significant role in its inception.

The relationship between Theosophy and modern art is fascinating and complex, and impossible to cover fully in just one chapter. The present focus lies therefore, albeit briefly, primarily upon the genesis of abstract art, its form, and the purpose of art.

*“Founding Fathers”: Mondrian, Kandinsky, Kupka*

The period beginning with the establishment of the Theosophical Society (1875) and continuing up to the 1920s was also a period of various art currents. Many artists have fallen under Theosophy’s sphere of influence, but their work is stylistically Symbolist, Expressionist, or abstract, for example. There is thus no “Theosophical style,” although, as their art is in part Theosophically inspired, one can perhaps speak of a coherence in *content*. More importantly, there is also coherence in *form* that is Theosophically inspired – and that *Theosophical form* will concern us here.4

The art current most associated with Theosophy is abstract art. Although it is a matter of dispute whether abstract art actually “began” with Kandinsky (1866–1944), he is nevertheless seen, together with

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