

# Art and Originality

by

**Philip Sherrard**

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It is towards the end of his *Republic* that Plato introduces the discussion about art and artists, poetry and poets, in which he concludes that the artist is no fit candidate for admission to the well-ordered common-wealth. More often than not this conclusion is remembered while the argument on which it is based is forgotten. This argument presupposes that the universe is a hierarchic structure composed of different levels descending from the realm of intelligible Ideas or archetypes, and even from beyond that, down to the least particle of sensory or material existence. These levels are not separated from one another in such a way that each constitutes a self-contained and self-sufficient compartment. On the contrary, they all interconnect and intercommunicate, each level in the descending scale being the offspring of the one above it, while generating the one below it. There is thus an unbroken chain of subordination that from level to level gives coherence and unity to the universal hierarchy. Each level is in both a median and a mediating position; and all that distinguishes one level from the level above it is that it is more limited in scope, and so excludes certain of the qualities to be found in the level above it. Or at least it excludes these qualities in so far as they are less fully active and developed than in the level above; it does not exclude them as potentialities that it is capable of developing.

When it comes to considering those aspects of this hierarchic structure that we are able to experience through the senses, it may be said that every visible thing in our world has its origin in a corresponding invisible archetype that pre-exists on a higher level. It is a copy of this archetype, not simply a static or external copy but one sharing a real affinity or kinship with its unseen original. Or it is an image of this archetype, in that it does not originate in itself or belong to itself but originates in the archetype of which it is the image and to which it owes absolutely everything it is. Reality, or greater reality, resides in the archetype. Whatever reality a thing possesses it derives from its archetype: it does not possess any intrinsic reality in its own right, as an autonomous entity. Compared with the reality of the archetype it is but a shadowy thing, and it will become still more a shadowy thing if it turns away from, or is persuaded to turn away from, its original. Conversely, if it moves toward its archetype by nourishing the potentialities that have been bestowed on it by the archetype, it will become less a shadowy thing, more imbued with those qualities—beauty, harmony, peace, being—that subsist in a fully developed and fully active state only in supreme reality itself.

The artist that Plato would exclude from his commonwealth is what we would call the naturalistic or realistic artist. He is the artist who takes as his model not the invisible archetypes but their multiple and fluctuating manifestations in the visible and material world, the world of change, as well as his own physical and psychological reactions to them. He thinks that in so doing he is representing reality whereas in fact he is but representing a reflection of reality. His art is therefore a reflection of a reflection, a copy of a copy, a shadow of a shadow. As such it can but lead people further away from reality, seduce them into the labyrinths of unreality, and confirm them in what is ultimately an illusion and a lie. Because Plato's concern is with truth and with true knowledge, he regards anything that contributes to confirming man in falsity and ignorance as unworthy of a place in the ideal human society; and as the art of the artists he has in mind does this, he would exclude such artists from his republic.

Yet the failure of these artists is not simply that they misrepresent reality. They also damage and corrupt the human soul. For just as the structure of reality is hierarchical, so for Plato is the structure of the human soul. In fact, Plato distinguishes three aspects of the soul. One is that according to which we are moved by our desire for something or, conversely, by our repulsion for it; the second is the highly charged emotive force that expresses itself in violent or vehement outbursts of feeling, chiefly feelings of anger; and the third is the power of the intelligence. The first two constitute what nowadays we would call the emotional side of our being, and indeed they do have this in common, that they are both brought into action under the stimulus of some external influence or object. They are, in other words, that part of our being which is acted upon and reacts to whatever it is that acts upon it.

The third aspect of the soul, the intelligence—which is by no means to be identified solely with the reason, since it possesses a capacity that goes far beyond ratiocination—is also its supreme aspect. It is the aspect that is capable of assessing and discriminating between the various influences and objects that affect the soul, of accepting those that accord with its knowledge of what is good and profitable, and of rejecting those that debase or are destructive. In this respect it is the active agent in the soul, that which is responsible for maintaining the soul's inner harmony and equilibrium, which it does by keeping control over the emotional aspects of our being, and by preventing them from reacting in ways that are discordant and uncoordinated. In a famous simile Plato likens the soul to the chariot drawn by two horses and driven by a single charioteer. The two horses correspond to the two emotional forces that he distinguishes, while the charioteer corresponds to the intelligence. So long as the charioteer holds the reins and guides the chariot in accordance with the principles of the supernal wisdom which he derives from his knowledge of the archetypes, all is well. But should he lose control, and should the horses pull the chariot this way and that as they react impulsively and indiscriminately to the multifarious disruptive influences that assault them from all sides, then they will drag the chariot—the soul—to destruction.

Yet it is precisely to the inferior, emotional aspects of the soul that the artist whom Plato would reject makes his appeal. As we saw, such an artist's attention is directed, not to the world of archetypes, but merely to their reflections in the material world; and his art is consequently but a reflection of these reflections, a copy of these copies. Hence it is capable of acting only upon the most exterior, excitable and fluctuating part of our being, persuading us to surrender ourselves to and indulge ourselves in the various emotions and feelings it produces in us quite apart from whether or not these emotions and feelings conduce to the realization of the potentialities inherent in the higher part of our being, that which relates to the sphere of our intelligence and our spiritual nature. In other words, such art flatters and enforces our weaknesses, allowing us to attribute a spurious validity to their expression because we find them reflected, and so by implication validated, in the works that these poets and painters hold up for our admiration and enlightenment. Indeed, such artists are themselves under an impulsion to direct their art above all to the emotional side of our being, because if they are to have any popular success they cannot make it appeal too overtly to the intelligence: the lower emotional side of our nature is that which preponderates in most of us, while intelligence is cultivated and developed only by a few.

Hence these artists are unfit to be included in the Platonic commonwealth on two counts: first because their creations lack significance when assessed by the standards of truth and reality; and second because they make their appeal, not to the higher aspects of the soul, but to one which is as inferior as the world they represent. They are image-makers whose images are phantoms and shadows; and they seek to gratify the exterior and aesthetic aspects of our being. They deal with what is at third remove from reality, and they can produce their remote semblances with no knowledge of the truth. Living in a world of appearances, and adrift in a kind of twilight between reality and unreality, they reproduce only those vague penumbral notions that flatter the taste or evoke the applause of the ignorant and self-absorbed. As Plato himself puts it: "Strip what the poet has to say of its poetical coloring, and reduce it to plain prose, and I think you know how little it amounts to. It is like a face lacking real beauty that has lost bloom of youth."

It is clear from what he writes elsewhere that Plato's denigration of the artist applies not to every type of artist but only to the type that he is at pains to categorize in this particular discussion in the *Republic*. Nor from what is said in this discussion is it difficult to deduce the kind of artist from whom Plato would not withhold his approval. If what vitiates the art of the artist who mistakes the semblance for the reality is that by leading man away from reality it involves him even more deeply in illusions and unrealities which foster the baser aspects of his nature, then an art which does the opposite and directs attention to the truth must be ennobling and commendable. Such an art will be one that "celebrates the praises of the gods", as Plato puts it. To celebrate the gods in this context means that the artist must give his attention, not to the appearances of reality or to his reactions to them, but to reality itself; not to the outward reflections but to the inner and original archetypes or essences that animate and inspire them.

The gods are these archetypes or essences. They are the ever-youthful, ever-productive sources of all that is revealed in the world of time and space. By raising his intelligence—for they are intelligible realities—towards them and by apprehending or intuiting them in his inner vision, the artist will allow the radiations of their presence to flow into and to inform his work. At the same time interpretation of human realities, of the mysteries of life and death, will be in the light of the understanding and criteria with which they provide him. His work will not then be at one with reality itself. But at least it will be an evocation or symbol of it, untrammelled as far as possible by his purely personal and private responses. As such it will be capable of reawakening in whoever approaches it a recollection of the reality that it evokes. It will not distract and disperse his attention among the ever-vanishing fugitive forms of the material world and his own emotional and psychological reactions to them. On the contrary, it will lead him back towards the ever-present and irrepressible life-giving springs which lie at the root of their as well as of his own existence. In this way it will be a means of helping to restore him to himself, of helping him to recover his true identity by liberating him from the false masks with which he is so desperately prone to confuse himself.

This of course is the nature and function of all sacred art and may even be said to be that which constitutes its sacredness. Indeed, it is only in the light of some such understanding of things as that which Plato proposes that we can begin to grasp certain features of traditions of sacred art—the art of ancient Egypt, the art of the Christian icon, the art of India and so on—that we tend to find daunting, not to say incomprehensible. The first such feature is the sheer persistence of these traditions. Conditioned as we are to expect and accept fashions and trends in art in which both the inner content and the outward form change virtually from generation to generation, if not from artist to artist, and which become dated almost as soon as the paint is dry on the canvas or the ink on the paper, it is bewildering for us to be confronted by an art whose form and content both remain, except for slight and sometimes imperceptible modifications, constant for anything up to two thousand years or more. Faced with this apparent enormity, we tend to seek refuge in some sociological explanation or other, such as that this art is one of the means by which a sacerdotal or royal caste attempts to ensure its continuation in power by maintaining a *status quo* in which a sacrosanct character is attributed to the role of priest or king. In so doing we both forget that no art can be produced under conditions of duress, and reveal ourselves to be victims of exactly that kind of ignorance of which Plato accuses the artists whom he would refuse to admit to his republic.

For by definition a work of sacred art is the product of a vision that is concentrated on the inner essences or archetypes that lie behind and within the ever-changing world of physical and even psychological appearances; and as these essences and archetypes are themselves unchanging, their manifestation or expression in the forms of art will confer on that art a stability of content totally inaccessible to an art concerned primarily to represent the world of time and place and the artist's own emotional and psychological reactions to it. And once these forms themselves have been found adequate to the reality they aspire to enshrine, and so to fulfill their

purpose or function of helping man to make or maintain contact with this reality (for such contact, however slight, is understood to be a condition of living a life not doomed to delinquency and disintegration), there is little point in deforming them in order to accommodate the whims and vagaries of the individual artist. Naturally this art—a sacred art—makes its dominant appeal, not to our emotions, but to our intelligence; for the reality that it represents, whether in terms of sacred images or in terms of the human and other experience it interprets, is, as we said, an intelligible reality. It is this that explains how once we have learnt the symbolic language of one form of sacred art it becomes possible for us to learn the symbolic language of other such forms as well: for the reality that informs all such forms will ultimately be the same in each case, however much allowance has to be made for the different points of view from which it is approached. Consequently we simply have to apply the knowledge we have gained through our penetration into the inner content of one sacred form to the reading of another such form. On the other hand, for the person incapable of responding with his intelligence the symbols of every form of sacred art will remain a closed book, not to say a dead language.

The second feature of traditions of sacred art that we tend to find baffling—and here we approach the main thrust of these considerations—is the capacity of this art to speak to us, once we have mastered its language, in a way that is limitlessly fresh and undated, whatever may be its age in terms of history or chronology. It possesses an immediacy and a contemporaneousness that we may look for in vain in works exhibited in our galleries of modern art or in anthologies of modern poetry, or indeed in much of the art of the post-Renaissance western world. Why this is so should not be too difficult for us to understand when once we have a clear idea of what is presupposed in the making of a work of sacred art. But for our immediate purpose—to explain why a work of sacred art possesses such a dateless quality—we can perhaps best achieve this clarification through an enquiry into what it is that constitutes true originality in a work of art.

When we call a work of art original or say that it possesses originality what we generally mean is that either it introduces some new and unfamiliar subject matter, or it involves new and unfamiliar techniques, or it does both. Innovation in one form or another is for us the hallmark of originality; and one of the factors, if not the main factor, that conduces to our calling someone an artist is that his work displays originality in this sense. Certainly at least it would be virtually impossible for us to apply this epithet to someone unless his work did display such originality. Failure to demonstrate innovation in one way or another would simply lead us to call the work academic, or derivative, or stereotyped, and its author a plagiarist or a mere copier, or something equally disparaging. A consequence of this is that everyone in our world who aspires to be an artist feels under a compulsion to be original, to express something new or to elaborate a new style or technique. We talk about a painter having to find his own style or a poet having to find his own voice. So great is the compulsion under which an aspiring artist works in this respect that almost by definition now he is forced to innovate before he can claim to be an artist at all. In fact of course most such innovations are in the form of expression, in the elaboration and exploitation of new techniques, since even judged by present-day standards of what is new and

what is not, originality in terms of content is beyond the capacity of most of us. In any case, the critics who establish the fashions in contemporary art would hardly presume to assess the value of a painting or a poem in terms of its content, first because what is being said is usually far from clear and second because to introduce value-judgments about a work of art on the basis of what it says, even when this is intelligible, would require a declaration of fundamental beliefs that very few critics other than avowed Marxist critics are willing to make. Hence, since *a priori* they demand that a work should display originality as a condition of qualifying in their eyes as a work of art at all, they are compelled to demand that it shows it in terms of stylistic or technical innovation. In this way they, too, aid and abet that endless pursuit of such innovation which characterizes so much of the artistic activity of our times.

There is no doubt an underlying logic in this pursuit of originality in terms of innovation, in this demand that every artist, in order to earn his title, must be original in this sense, as though such originality were a positive, in fact an indispensable quality in its own right. It is a logic intimately intertwined with all our ideas about progress, evolution, extending the frontiers of knowledge, and so on, that are so much part and parcel of the modern scientific *weltanschauung* which still persists with us in spite of the indescribable mess into which it has led us. In fact, the emergence of these ideas is itself the direct consequence of displacing the mediaeval Christian vision which continued to see reality as a multi-leveled structure in terms very similar to those effective for the Platonic vision, and gradually substituting for it the modern scientific outlook for which reality is reduced to a single time-space dimension and to the events that take place within it—on, that is to say, the single material plane of what we call history; and it is as a result of this change of perspective that man's destiny is envisaged as attaining its fulfillment no longer in a transcendent, supra-historical state of being but in an ideal society towards which he is said to be advancing through time and which will be established in the purely historical future. This means that changes on the historical plane, the appearance, invention or discovery of what is new, begin to be credited with a positive value in their own right, for they are seen as the outward evidence of man's inner progress and evolution.

By the end of the nineteenth century such ideas as these had gained an overriding ascendancy; and it is in their light that we can understand why for an artist not to display originality in the sense we have been discussing would be little less than a confession of failure. For it would be tantamount to admitting that he is incapable of contributing anything to humanity's forward march, to the establishment of the *noosphere* (or whatever the term is that is now in favor when describing the future state towards which we are supposed to be advancing); and that due to this lack of genuine creative genius he is forced to resort to outmoded models, to the repetition of what has already been done or said by others, to be retrogressive, old-fashioned and out of touch, even guilty of putting the clock back. Moreover, since our attention is now directed almost uncompromisingly towards the world of change, and such change by definition is endowed with a positive value because it is thought to be a condition of our evolution, and the manifest proof that we are in fact evolving, for an artist to opt out of this process, and to refuse to

show originality by not introducing into his work something that reflects this change, would be seen as a retrograde if not suicidal step, equivalent to that of a scientist who refused to make new experiments in order to advance the progress of his science. For an artist not to be original in the sense that we have been indicating would be for us, and for him, a contradiction in terms.

Originality where a work of sacred art is concerned has, on the other hand, a completely different meaning. Curiously enough, it is a meaning much more closely related to the etymology of the word. So far from denoting something that has not been done or produced before, or that is novel in character and style, which is what it does denote when we demand it from a modern work of art, originality in a work of sacred art is the quality which relates this work to its origin, which relates it to its source or cause, to that from which it arises or springs. For such a work to be original, therefore, it has to express, reveal or embody such an origin; and what is meant when it is said that a work of sacred art possesses originality is not that there is something new about it but that it is the faithful image of the source or archetype from which it derives and which the artists intended to show forth through it. Works of sacred art, we saw, are sacred because they evoke or symbolize the archetypes. Such archetypes are the originals which the sacred artist attempts to apprehend or intuit; and if his work possesses any originality it will do so because he has to some degree been successful in this attempt and has therefore been able to inform his work with something of the substance of these originals. In the case of such a work, therefore, originality has nothing to do with innovation either in terms of content or in terms of style or technique. It has to do simply with the fact that it symbolizes or evokes the invisible reality of the archetypes as faithfully as possible. It originates in this reality; and it is because it manifests its origin that it possesses originality.

We are now in a position to see why sacred art possesses such a trans-temporal capacity to communicate directly with our intelligence when once we have begun to master its symbolic language. It is that unlike non-sacred art, which attempts to represent the events of the ordinary everyday world and the feelings and ideas generated by our physical and psychological reactions to them, and so to express what is essentially subjective and transient, sacred art draws its sustenance, and its originality, from those ever renewed and ever-renewing, inexhaustible and unfailing sources of life of which it is the image. It is their image not because it reflects them in an exterior and impersonal way but because there is a real sharing or participation of the image in the archetypal reality it shows forth. The image is this archetypal reality in another mode. As such it embodies the actual presence of its original. There is a kind of equivalence or inner affinity between them. And this affinity or equivalence, which presupposes the actual presence of the archetype in the image, is not something that a work of sacred art can lose, or that can be withdrawn from it. It remains intrinsic to it, however long it may endure in terms of time. It can never become less original, less a contemporary expression of what always is, really and unchangeably, than it was when it first came into being.

The Indian dancer who dances a dance whose form was elaborated two thousand years ago or more is not merely repeating something that has been handed down to her from generation to generation and which still charms us because we still find the movements and gestures, the music and color, beautiful. She is actually revealing to us, and making present for us, something of the timeless inner and transcendent harmony and rhythm of life, as relevant, youthful, deathless and original today as it ever was or ever will be. No doubt she is able to do this because through long, patient and assiduous practice of, and spiritual meditation on, the form of the dance she has herself not only assimilated this form to such an extent that its transcendent supra-individual inspiration can flow through her unimpeded, but has also penetrated into its inner meaning in a way that implies that her own consciousness is now permeated by the higher consciousness her dance is to reveal. In a sense, it is no longer she who dances; it is the Lord of the dance who dances through her and in her. "It is not I who live, but Christ in me", as St. Paul expresses it in another context. In this way her dance is truly a celebration of the praises of the god, a celebration in which we too can participate provided we are willing and able to look on it not simply with what Blake would call our corporeal vision but also with the eyes of our intelligence. And this applies to all other types of sacred art: their originality remains always with them. And as they represent or show forth states of being or states of consciousness that correspond to permanent and ineradicable possibilities in our own nature, and so reveal to us what we could be if only we became what in the depths of ourselves we truly are, they retain always their capacity to promote within us, provided we learn to read their symbolic language with the eyes of the intelligence, that act of self-revelation and self-discovery which it is their proper function to initiate and to nourish.

Indeed, one begins to wonder whether our whole modern conception of the artist as a creative genius does not militate against or even effectively preclude the production of any works of art other than those that Plato would regard as unworthy of human attention. The artist who produces a work of sacred art could never think of himself as a creator or as a creative genius in the modern sense of the words, with all that they imply with regard to the originality of his work. The most he could think he could do would be to concreate. [That is, to participate as a kind of co-creator along with the ultimate Creator.—Ed.] In fact, from one point of view what he does is more to reproduce than to create. He has to submit as though he had no higher aspiration and with a kind of obtuse compliance to the discipline of practicing, through endless repetition, a given form until he has so mastered all its details that its original and transcendent inspiration can begin, as we said, to flow through him unimpeded and to animate his own workmanship. When this happens; when formal act and spiritual content begin to flow together, it will no longer be a matter of external copying or repetition; it will be a matter of directing the forces of inspiration of which he is now the vehicle into formal patterns that long practice and meditation have enabled him to master, inwardly and outwardly. In doing this, his effort will be to exclude all originality in the modern sense. In fact his whole undertaking requires an increasing self-effacement, an increasing liberation from all desire for self-expression, or for the expression of

his own genius and individuality. So much is this the case that he may not even permit his name to be attached to his work, since the mere fact of claiming it as his own work would be for him proof that he has not yet attained, as man and artist, the degree of perfection—of true originality, or return to the origin—to which he is summoned.

It will be clear from this that such self-effacement is not in the least something negative. On the contrary, it is a condition of the artist's realization of his status as mediator between higher and lower levels of reality, of his sense of responsibility as a catalyst through whose agency his fellow-beings may be reminded or made mindful of their own origins, so eclipsed by their attachments to the shadow-world of the empirical ego. For such realization presupposes that the artist frees his own consciousness from this attachment and raises it to the level on which the archetype of his own true being exercises its transfiguring and liberating power. It is knowledge of the world of the archetypes which the artist attains through the realization of his own true being that in its turn permits him to infuse into the forms of his art a similar power. In this way he participates by means of his art in the whole theurgic process on which the equilibrium and harmony of the universe depends, level mirroring level, intelligible and sensible linked in profound communion. His role is thus a priest-like one in that he becomes an instrument through which the higher performs with respect to the lower a function that is at once both revelatory and redemptive.

All this is very far from what tends to be the attitude and practice of the modern artist, especially when, as is so often the case, he does not even acknowledge supernal realities, let alone try to celebrate them in his work. And if this does imply that such an artist is thereby precluded from producing a work which has the quality and function that give sacred art such a crucial role wherever and whenever it is recognized, should we not ask him, and ourselves, what claim his art has to our attention, and of what significance is the self-determined originality that he feels under such an obligation to display?