

Eyes to See: Approaching the Spiritual in World Art

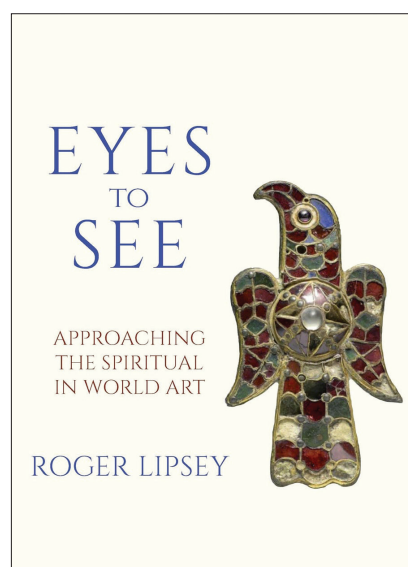
ROGER LIPSEY

Rhinebeck, N.Y.: Monkfish, 2026. 205 pp., paper, \$35.

In *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, French philosopher Jacques Maritain hailed art as the continuation of divine creation. “It is therefore true to say with Dante,” he wrote, “that our human art is, as it were, the grandchild of God.” Many spiritually inclined art critics and artistically inclined religious thinkers have approximated that sentiment. Lipsey, no stranger to Maritain’s country or his masters and disciples, virtually proves it. This book is a tribute to the cunning individuals throughout history, known and unknown, whose works make our galleries (sometimes, at least) feel like temples.

Lipsey has earned the right to offer such freewheeling commentary on the ways of gods and artists. His unscripted explorations of the French countryside’s “open-air museum” and the independent path he cut at New York University’s Institute of Fine Arts prepared him well for an uncommon career addressing both the academic establishment and the enlightened public. His multiple callings in history, translation, and cultural criticism have rendered the course of his life hard to define but easy to envy. His books consistently receive praise. Fluent in the thought of G.I. Gurdjieff, Thomas Merton, Dag Hammarskjöld, and any number of other mystics and ethicists, he has arguably attained the rank of “true scholar” that he finds manifested so brilliantly in the achievement of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, the great philosopher of sacred art.

The wisdom of Coomaraswamy serves as this book’s invocation. The epigraph is well chosen, for Lipsey’s intent is to expose the “deepest principles of life” at the heart of art and art’s mysterious mission in human experience. He calls the book a “collection of icons,” by which he means artifacts, usually exquisitely constructed, that lure our eyes into their native zones of form and function and launch our imaginations toward realms of wonder



beyond measure. Using traditional language, he speaks of reading the icons like sacred texts, not just gazing upon them or endeavoring to analyze them.

He shares C.S. Lewis’s disdain for mere appreciation. But he has no quarrel with the much debated “personalist heresy.” What we read in these objects, according to Lipsey, are tales of biography and phylogeny, including hints of stories left behind by the often anonymous artists and their patrons. The inscription *Gislebertus hoc fecit*, “Gislebertus made this,” engraved in a twelfth-century cathedral’s Last Judgment scene, fascinates him as much as the church’s interior rendering of an angel rousing sleepy magi on their journey to find Christ.

The structure of the book, as rich as its generous color illustrations, includes fifty-one concise reflections on specific works or sets of works, six sections called “parentheses,” three sections featuring “a few words” on specific subthemes, and an epilogue based on works in stone: Matisse’s neo-archaic sculptures entitled *Backs* and Isamu Noguchi’s austere *Funerary Monument*.

The full range of the selected objects is breathtaking. Chronologically they stretch from nearly 3500 BC to the twentieth-century. Geographically they cover Western Europe, the Mediterranean, the Middle East, south Asia, and east Asia. Culturally, Egyptian and Greek paganism, premodern

Christianity and Islam, the dharma traditions of the subcontinent, and the wisdom traditions of China and Japan dominate. Vermeer, Rembrandt, and Jean Siméon Chardin populate the minority of moderns. Robert Fludd’s map of the mind from his seventeenth-century *Utriusque Cosmi Historia* (“History of Each World”) may be Lipsey’s most inspired choice. Lipsey’s pause to remember Merton’s meditation at the massive Buddha figures in Polonnaruwa—just weeks before the monk’s death—displays the author’s penchant for tenderness. Critics may pounce on perceived omissions, but the intent is reverent testimony, not encyclopedic coverage or objective cataloguing.

Almost as valuable as his commentary on the varied objects of beauty and curiosity is the black-and-white of Lipsey’s reflections on iconography in general—what icons are, how they come to us, and what they do for us. “Icons raise lasting questions,” he says. Some are perennial: why humans make art at all. Others arise in our time: questions of provenance, ownership, and the cost of colonial conquest. A champion of Diogenes and the cosmopolitan ideal, Lipsey is soberly aware of two truths: each person’s need for a “home culture” and the status of many of his chosen icons as “displaced objects.”

Readers of *Eyes to See* may wish to require it for classroom use or enshrine it on an altar of its own. They may pack it for an aesthetic getaway or one of our century’s great migrations. Some may dismiss its elevation of the spiritual or quibble over its definitions. Its destiny may be as vagrant as the nameless or forgotten artists who from one century to another have built bridges of insight across oceans and continents sharing techniques, perspectives, and visions. Lipsey’s assembly of God’s grandchildren affirms a kinship we cannot afford to forget.

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