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The Social Implications of Art Activity: An Examination from the Traditionalism Perspective

Abstract

The Traditionalist school that emerged in the twentieth century can be described, above all, as a form of thought developed in opposition to the modernist approach. At its core lies the claim that the philosophia perennis -and, by extension, the primordial conceptions of being and knowledge- ought to be rearticulated and disseminated within the modern world. Thinkers associated with this school, whose philosophical outlook encompasses multiple layers of reflection, have consistently displayed a particular concern with questions of art and aesthetics. For them, the function of art is not to engender individual pleasure but to render visible transcendent truths, thereby serving as a vehicle for human perfection and, ultimately, as a formative force in social life. Drawing on the thought of René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon, Titus Burckhardt, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, this article seeks to explore the relationship between art and society from a Traditionalist perspective. The analysis proceeds by subjecting the school's principal positions to scholarly scrutiny, with a specific focus on the tripartite typology of art -sacred, profane, and traditionalist- as well as on the Traditionalist conception of human perfection. In so doing, the study further examines the civilizational vision that underpins these artistic categories and considers their broader social implications.

Keywords: Traditionalism, Modernism, Sacred Art, Social Order, Social Benefit.

Sanat Faaliyetinin Toplumsal Yansımaları: Tradisyonizm Perspektifinden Bir İnceleme

Öz

Yirminci yüzyılda ortaya çıkan Tradisyonist ekol her şeyden önce modernist yaklaşıma karşı geliştirilmiş bir düşünce biçimi olarak ifade edilebilir. Bu ekolün merkeze aldığı temel iddia, *ezeli hikmetin* -ve onun uzantısı olarak varlık ve bilgi anlayışının- modern dünyada yeniden ifade edilmesi ve yaygınlaştırılması gerektiğidir. Çok katmanlı felsefi bir perspektife sahip olan bu ekolün düşünürleri, sanat ve estetik meselelerine özel bir önem atfetmişlerdir. Onlara göre sanatın işlevi, bireysel haz uyandırmanın ötesinde, aşkın hakikatleri görünür kılmak; böylelikle insanın yetkinleşmesine aracılık etmek ve nihayetinde toplumsal yaşamın şekillenmesinde kurucu bir rol üstlenmektir. Bu makale, René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon, Titus Burckhardt ve Seyyid Hüseyin Nasr'ın düşüncelerinden hareketle, Tradisyonist perspektiften sanat ile toplum arasındaki ilişkiyi incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Analiz, ekolün temel görüşlerini bilimsel bir incelemeye tâbi tutarak; özellikle sanatın üçlü tasnifine -kutsal, tradisyonist ve profan- ve Tradisyonist insan yetkinliği anlayışına odaklanmaktadır. Böylelikle çalışma, söz konusu sanatsal kategorilerin dayandığı medeniyet tasavvurunu ele almakta ve onların daha geniş toplumsal yansımalarını tartışmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Tradisyonizm, Modernizm, Kutsal Sanat, Toplumsal Düzen, Toplumsal Fayda.

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1. Introduction

Traditionalism emerged as a reaction against the exclusionary and disparaging tendencies of the “progressivist” modernity represented by the West. In the face of this marginalization - observable both temporally and spatially- traditionalists advocated an alternative vision grounded in Eastern thought and, by extension, defended the notion of primordial wisdom that modernism had largely disregarded (Öçal & Özyurt, 2013: 14). According to Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the earliest Western usage of the concept of *philosophia perennis* can be traced back to Augustinus Steuchus’ 1540 treatise *De Perenni Philosophia*. Yet, the term acquired its renown primarily through Leibniz’s (d. 1716) 1715 letter, in which he declared that he sought traces of truth in ancient thinkers in order to distinguish light from darkness, thereby aiming to bring forth a *perennis quaedam philosophia*. Despite similar efforts, the modern, Western-centered philosophical tradition -championing the idea of “progress” while excluding religious and metaphysical thought- long overshadowed this quest for truth and relegated it to a secondary status (Nasr, 2013: 7). Nasr’s reflections, penned in 1975, clearly serve to legitimize the Traditionalist movement by presenting it as a current of intellectual continuity, and more importantly, as an orientation not novel but rooted in an ancient mode of thought. Nasr sought to substantiate these claims within the frameworks of Illuminationist philosophy and Sufism. Nevertheless, regardless of how far back its adherents attempt to extend its intellectual or philosophical genealogy, it is an established fact that Traditionalism, as a distinct philosophical school, began to take shape in the 1920s under the leadership of René Jean-Marie-Joseph Guénon (d. 1951) (Tahrallı, 1988; Sedgwick, 2004; Kanık, 2016; Waterfield, 2002).

By the late 1920s, Guénon’s works had begun to gain recognition beyond France. Many of the readers and followers of his writings during this period would later play significant roles in the development of the traditionalist approach. At the forefront of this group, without doubt, stands Ananda Coomaraswamy (d. 1947). A Sri Lankan-born Englishman who had emigrated to the United States during the First World War, Coomaraswamy was a distinguished art historian and the first academic to support the traditionalist current. Prior to his engagement with Guénon’s writings, his scholarly focus centered on what was then referred to as “Eastern Art.” Interestingly, although he never met Guénon in person, the extensive correspondence between them profoundly influenced him, directing his attention toward the metaphysical foundations of art. In this context, Coomaraswamy sought to ground the traditionalist perspective within the framework of Buddhist thought (Sedgwick, 2004: 34-36, 51-53).

Frithjof Schuon (d. 1998), a devoted admirer of Guénon and a key figure in the development of the Traditionalist school, was born in Basel, Switzerland, to a German musician father and a French mother. In his youth, Schuon showed an interest in non-Christian religions and aspired to become a painter; however, financial difficulties compelled him to abandon his formal education and take employment in a factory (Sedgwick, 2004: 82-84). From an early age, he immersed himself in the canonical works of Western -particularly German- philosophy while also studying the intellectual heritage of the East, including the *Upanishads*, alongside the dialogues of Plato and other classical Greek texts (Schuon, 1996:10-18). Later in life, Schuon produced paintings and poetry highly esteemed by his followers. His encounter with Guénon’s writings in 1924 marked a decisive turning point, and by 1928 his correspondence and publications already revealed a deepening interest in Islam. During the 1930s, he attended Arabic lessons at the Paris Mosque, conducted studies on traditional arts, and initiated a

personal correspondence with Guénon. In this period, he traveled to Algeria, where he came under the influence of the Shādhiliyya order, converted to Islam, and adopted the name Isa Nur al-Din (Koltaş, 2020: 482-484). Among the eminent intellectuals counted among Schuon's disciples are Titus Burckhardt (d. 1984) (Alkan, 2020), Martin Lings (Abu Bakr Siraj al-Din, d. 2005) (Kazimi, 2009), Charles le Gai Eaton (Hassan Abdul Hakeem, d. 2010) (Gurkan, 2020), and Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Jahanbegloo, 2020).

The intellectual backgrounds of traditionalist thinkers exhibit a striking degree of similarity. Their shared interests include esotericism, occult studies, non-Western religious traditions, and art. Figures such as Coomaraswamy, Schuon, Burckhardt, and Nasr placed art at the very center of metaphysical activity in their writings. While the works of Coomaraswamy and Schuon foreground Christian art, Burckhardt and Nasr emphasize the spiritual dimension of art, particularly as interpreted through the lens of Islamic artistic traditions. Guénon, by contrast, focused less on particular artistic manifestations within specific traditions and more on the universal principles underlying artistic activity as a whole (Sedgwick, 2004: 99).

2. The Needs of Modern Society: Tradition and Perennial Wisdom

Thinkers of the traditionalist school employ the concepts of metaphysics, religion, and spirituality -while acknowledging their subtle distinctions- in a manner largely equivalent to that of *tradition*. Among the notions through which they construct their intellectual ties to ancient modes of thought, the idea of *perennial wisdom* holds a central place. In the Western intellectual heritage, this corresponds to such terms as *philosophia perennis*, *sophia perennis*, and *scientia sacra* (Evkuran, 2006). Although Aldous Huxley (d. 1963) maintained that Gottfried Leibniz (d. 1716) was the first to use the expression *philosophia perennis* (Huxley, 1999: 12), the true originator of the concept was the sixteenth-century Italian cleric Agostino Steuco (d. 1548) (Nasr, 2011: 81). Yet, as a Renaissance polemicist opposing both Lutheran and Aristotelian tendencies, Steuco was in fact drawing upon a much older intellectual current. At its core, this current asserted that the roots of Greek philosophy lay in the wisdom of the ancient East. Emerging first in legends concerning the sojourns of Pythagoras and Solon in Egypt, and later reinforced by early Christian apologists who, inspired by Philo of Alexandria (d. 50 CE), proclaimed Moses as the founder of philosophy, this tradition gained further significance in the Early Modern period and eventually became a central paradigm in the historiography of philosophy. Leibniz himself engaged extensively with the then-popular currents of Kabbalism, which, beginning with Pico della Mirandola (d. 1494), had already been incorporated into the narrative of the *philosophia perennis* (Amberger, 2019).

According to Nasr's analysis, Steuco's formulation of *philosophia perennis* encompassed, on the one hand, philosophy and human reasoning, and on the other, theology and belief. As Steuco argued, wisdom derives from a divine source; it is sacred knowledge (*prisca theologia*) originally bestowed by God through Adam but subsequently neglected and preserved only in a dreamlike state (Nasr, 1995a: 78, 81-82). At this point, the notion most emphasized by Traditionalist thinkers is the *sacred* in general, and more specifically the concept of *scientia sacra*. Nasr draws attention to this concept by relating it to a metaphysical "supreme science" concerned with the divine principle and theophany. Designated in Latin as *scientia sacra*, this discipline constitutes the essence of all authentic religions and lies at the very core of human existence. In other words, sacred science is a body of knowledge that encompasses all dimensions of life—human spirituality, art, thought, and even nature itself. Rooted in ultimate

reality, it remains difficult yet not impossible to access. For an individual who does not confine his inner faculties within the rigid frameworks of modernity, it becomes attainable through the natural intellect (*intellectus*), which by its very nature reaches beyond the physical realm (Nasr, 1995a: 9). The sacred is thus the manifestation of God's eternal and immutable order within the temporal flow and the spiritual world in which humanity dwells. It does not belong entirely to this world, yet it permeates and gives it meaning. Since everything is created by God and ultimately returns to Him, all beings possess an orientation toward the sacred. The sacred is therefore present in every dimension of existence; however, its genuine manifestation can only be realized through humanity's submission to divine revelation. For this reason, the individual must turn toward God and rediscover the profound truth of his own soul in order to reestablish a connection with the sacred (Nasr, 1995b: 67).

Modern man, however, has long since lost the true meaning of wonder; this loss is the inevitable consequence of his desensitization to the manifestations of the sacred within the domain of existence. He is no longer capable of perceiving either the inner mysteries of reason or the miraculous truth inherent in human existence itself. Likewise, he remains unaware of the power of objectivity and the ontological significance of the possibility of attaining objective knowledge. Yet man has been endowed with the capacity to turn toward the infinite horizons of his inner world, to conceptualize the external world as an object, and to preserve subjective knowledge within the depths of his being alongside objective knowledge. By its very nature, knowledge is able to traverse not only the phenomenal realm but also the truth of the sacred; it can penetrate both the transcendent horizon of the knowing subject and the innermost core of the subject's own being. Thus, the knower and the known, inner consciousness and external reality, the pure and immanent subject and the transcendent order of being, the eternal essence and the absolute reality beyond all realms ultimately converge on the same ontological plane. In the final analysis, all these levels unite within the horizon of manifestation of the Absolute, wherein lies ultimate reality (Nasr, 2011: 13).

Nasr draws attention to the striking fact that the term *modern* has been ascribed a wide range of meanings—"contemporary," "innovative," "creative," "in keeping with the times," and so forth. In his view, what is overlooked in debates on modernism is precisely the distinction between foundational principles and the question of truth itself. As a result, discussions rarely inquire into whether a particular idea or mode of thought corresponds to any aspect of truth; rather, they problematize only whether it is "modern" or not. The framework of rationality offered by modern scientific approaches, contrary to common assumption, lacks the capacity to answer all questions concerning human existence. More importantly, this limitation is not a temporary problem that can be overcome with time, but a permanent condition; for modern science restricts itself to the knowledge of objects and confines its scope accordingly. Tragically, humanity has become imprisoned within this "modern" framework, thereby depriving itself of the metaphysical domain, which offers far broader possibilities for rendering existence intelligible (Nasr, 1995b: 74).

The most salient distinction between traditional science and modern science lies in the latter's rupture from the sacred dimension, resulting in its entirely profane character. Within the framework of Western scientific thought, whether the scientist is a mystic, deist, theist, atheist, or agnostic, the process of inquiry and intellectual production is consciously conducted in deliberate detachment from the notion of sacred knowledge (Nasr, 1995a: 101). Yet even

though the results of modern science point only to a limited aspect of reality, they nonetheless contain within themselves a metaphysical and symbolic depth. According to Seyyed Hossein Nasr, even if the scientist is unaware of this metaphysical truth, everything that claims participation in truth apart from God necessarily functions as a symbol of a higher order of reality.

A similar perspective is clearly discernible in the works of Guénon. For Guénon, the modern mindset is, by its very nature, wholly estranged from transcendent principles. This rupture manifests in modern science as positivism and agnosticism. The West, he argues, does not know truth, and moreover assumes that, since it does not know, no one else can know either. Such a stance conceals, at its core, a tacit confession of ignorance. Guénon interprets this as the West's sole means of disguising its own intellectual deficiency. In the hierarchy of knowledge, however, metaphysics occupies the highest rank, for it corresponds to the pure and transcendent knowledge of truth. Consequently, a science deprived of metaphysical grounding can never attain genuine knowledge of truth, nor can it encompass it within its scope.

Nasr is fully aware that, owing to such critiques, the traditionalist position may be accused of archaism or even of being anti-scientific. For this reason, he is careful to emphasize that by the term "modern" he does not mean "contemporary." More precisely, "modern" signifies a rupture from transcendent and immutable (*metaphysical*) principles. The fundamental opposition between Traditionalism and modernism thus derives from this divergence: while Traditionalism focuses on the manifestations of the divine at the human level, modernism disregards the relationship between the divine and the human altogether, and by attributing absolute reality to human reason, effectively divinizes man himself (Nasr, 1995b: 74).

3. Sacred Science and Art in a Profane Society

Traditionalist thought situates the sacred -and its connection with that which transcends human limitations in the realms of being, knowledge, and value- at the very center, in direct opposition to the profane worldview advanced by modernism. All traditional civilizations, in fact, have been shaped by the symbolic language of the sacred, taking root in the past while preserving a continuity destined to endure in the future. According to Schuon, the sacred is the intervention of the uncreated within the created. It is a mysterious incursion into the domain of existence, the transcendent truth concealed within the fragile and finite forms of this world. Surrounded by inviolable and immutable principles, the sacred is that which cannot be corrupted or altered (Schuon, 2007: 4). For Schuon, three essential qualities must be present for something to be regarded as sacred: first, it must be *transcendent*, bearing loftiness, sublimity, and divine quality; second, it must possess absolute certainty; and third, it must exhibit a nature beyond the comprehension of the ordinary human intellect. The sacred endows relative phenomena with absolute depth, bestowing upon ephemeral realities the texture of eternity (Schuon, 1998: 45).

Nasr underscores the centrality of the sacred within the traditionalist perspective. In his view, the sacred is intrinsically connected to the "primordial and immutable" principle, such that any object or message imbued with sacred character necessarily bears traces of the eternal. The human awareness of the sacred thus finds its origin in this linkage. Consequently, the sacred

constitutes the very source of tradition and is inseparable from it; indeed, the sacred is the lifeblood flowing through the veins of tradition itself (Nasr, 2011: 89).

As these observations suggest, the traditionalist study of the sacred -grounding it directly in principle and considering it indispensable to tradition- forms the very foundation of their reflections on science and art. Neither science nor art, in their view, can be severed from the transcendent and the divine. Hence, both are qualified as “sacred,” in sharp contrast to modern conceptions of science and art, from which Traditionalists sought to distance themselves. Accordingly, just as in other domains, the essence of science and art is understood to rest upon the Supreme Reality. Within the traditionalist framework, no science possesses intrinsic value by virtue of its mere existence; rather, its meaning and significance derive from its direct connection with pure metaphysics. Traditional sciences, therefore, are not only practical applications that carry their teachings into lived reality but also means of grasping truth in its multidimensional totality. For a select few, moreover, they function as preparation for, and gradual ascent toward, higher forms of knowledge. It is in this sense that such disciplines are included under the category of “sacred science,” insofar as they are rooted in metaphysical principles.

At the heart of Nasr’s conception of knowledge lies *scientia sacra*-the sacred science which, as he maintains, is present at the core of every revelation and constitutes the center of the circle encompassed by tradition. From the Traditionalist standpoint, the ultimate source of such knowledge is metaphysical principle itself. This form of knowledge is revealed through primordial tradition as a manifestation of ultimate truth, and for that reason it is often described as the “science of reality” or the “knowledge of the Haqq” (Nasr, 2011: 141-143; Chittick, 2012: 159-161). The aim of the traditional sciences is to approach the human being from a holistic perspective, considering him as an entity constituted of body, soul, and spirit. Thus, all sacred sciences of ancient civilizations were not established under the rubric of “science for science’s sake,” but rather for the purpose of cultivating the integrity of the human being. The methodologies of this process varied among traditions -some expressed themselves through abstract formulations, others through concrete and visible forms- but whatever the mode of expression, the language of tradition always conveyed truth through symbolic and analogical channels (Nasr, 1995a: 136-137).

From the traditionalist perspective, the concept of sacred science represents a stance diametrically opposed to, and in resistance against, modernism. While modern science endeavors to eliminate the sacred, traditional science prioritizes it, constructing its entire epistemological framework around this axis. Guénon, for instance, denounced the modern positivist mindset as “profane” and described its adherents as suffering from “intellectual myopia” (Guénon, 2004a: 62). Thus, the essential distinction between traditionalist and modern science is grounded in the fundamental opposition between the sacred and the profane.

4. The Two Faces of Art: Social Order and Catastrophe

Among the most powerful means by which the principles of Traditionalist thought are communicated is art. Closely bound to sacred science, art functions as a primary method for apprehending the essential principles of tradition and thus appears as one of the two principal modes of metaphysical expression. The Traditionalist school does not regard art merely as the preservation of a historical legacy or as the technical examination of material media. Rather, art

is interpreted as a manifestation of the divine (Burckhardt, 1987: 130), pointing to a domain of profound and transcendent significance beyond its human dimension.

In Arabic, the term *ṣanʿa* literally means “to fashion, to process, to make,” and in its technical sense it denotes “a systematic and distinctive method pursued in a material or intellectual endeavor.” In Western languages, the word *art* derives from the Latin *ars*, meaning “to arrange” (Koç, 2009). Within this context, one of the most pertinent concepts to consider is *tekhnê* (τέχνη). In ancient Greek thought, *tekhnê* occupied a central place, serving as one of the fundamental perspectives through which the Greeks sought to understand and articulate truth. In Greek sources, the term encompasses craftsmanship, manual skill, art, applied knowledge or science, the capacity to produce, technical ability, systematic procedure, and even cunning or craftiness. *Tekhnê* thus denotes the intelligence and ingenuity displayed in every form of production and craft. Accordingly, physicians, rhetoricians, and sculptors alike were regarded as “technicians,” despite the diversity of their pursuits (Schadewaldt, 1979: 159; Cuomo, 2007: 1). In much the same way as classical Islamic thought did not draw a strict distinction between art and craft, ancient Greek culture did not categorize the work of carpenters, poets, or potters as fundamentally different. Those engaged in such practices were collectively referred to as *tekhnitai*. In the modern period, domains that are now separately classified as art and craft, or art and technology, were all encompassed within the integrative semantic field of *tekhnê* (Durhan, 2020: 1981). The concept was seen as an indispensable force that simultaneously signified transformation and progress, rescuing humankind from a primitive, cave-dwelling existence and enabling its socialization. In this sense, *tekhnê* inherently implied utility and social benefit. Moreover, for an activity to qualify as *tekhnê*, it required not only technical proficiency but also a function that sustained or preserved life (Sennett, 2003: 34-35).

What is particularly striking is that in Greek mythology *tekhnê* is depicted not only in its positive connotations but also in its destructive potential. This duality is most vividly illustrated in the myth of Prometheus, as discussed in Plato’s *Protagoras*. The figure of Prometheus -who inspired Nasr’s critique of the “Promethean man” as emblematic of modernity- was punished for stealing *tekhnê* from the gods and distributing fire, the principal instrument of technical mastery, to humanity. While this gift elevated humans above animals, it also drove them to mutual violence and destruction. To restore order, Zeus commanded the distribution of virtues among human beings, ensuring balance in social relations and the punishment of those who defied harmony (Plato, 1967: 320d-322d).

From this perspective, *tekhnê* may be understood as encompassing the productive skills and practices that undergird the transition to urban life and distinguish human beings from animals, thereby forming the very foundations of civilization. Different intellectual traditions interpret this capacity as a uniquely human endowment; however, when not guided by virtues such as justice and humility, it becomes destabilized and yields tragic consequences. *Tekhnê*, that is to say art, is thus not merely a technical competence but an intrinsically human faculty that requires moral orientation. As a power that all individuals can possess and share, it has the capacity to generate beneficial outcomes at the societal level while simultaneously harboring dangers if left unchecked. The ancients recognized these latent perils of unrestrained creative intelligence, concluding that moral virtues must guide *tekhnê* (Agazzi, 1998: 80-85).

Plato’s *Protagoras* is not his sole work reflecting on the relationship between art and morality. In the *Republic*, for instance, he proposes the exclusion of artisans (*tekhnitai*) from the body of

citizens, or alternatively, the prohibition of citizens from engaging in craft-related activities. This position not only reflects a concern with wasted time but also reveals anxiety regarding the potential elevation of artisans in social status. The fact that practitioners of crafts and arts were subject to regulation, and that their products required official authorization, can be interpreted as evidence of this unease. Moreover, in his tripartite analogy between the city and the soul, Plato aligns artisans with the appetitive part of the soul, associating them with acquisitiveness—an identification that is deeply significant (Cuomo, 2007: 32-33).

The profoundly negative image of the “Promethean man,” as articulated by Nasr, resonates with Schuon’s equally severe judgments on the scientific revolution, particularly his provocative critique of Galileo. For Schuon, Galileo’s trial was justified insofar as science, deprived of metaphysical guidance, rests solely upon relative realities and thereby poses grave dangers. What endows science with meaning is its recognition of metaphysics as the “science of the Absolute.” Severed from metaphysics, science degenerates into an enterprise destined to culminate in humanity’s ruin. The only safeguard against such catastrophe, according to Schuon, is for science to remain under the guidance and supervision of wisdom; otherwise, science -as exemplified by modernity- inevitably leads to socially destructive outcomes (Schuon, 1982: 142; Schuon, 1995: 27).

In Traditionalist thought, art -being one of the domains most intimately connected with the sacred- forms an inseparable unity with knowledge, for in every traditional civilization all human activities ultimately derive from the same primordial principles. These principles, valid in the sciences, also govern the realms of art and craft. According to Guénon, Traditionalist art, as the product of human labor, may serve as a foundation for initiation; like initiation, which has the power to establish a supra-qualitative transcendence within the individual, art can act as an instrument orienting the person toward this very goal. Moreover, art reinforces the ground upon which spiritual orientation rests. This power and meaning permeate art only insofar as it remains faithful to Traditionalist principles. The sacred dimension absent from modern industry and its corollary, contemporary conceptions of art, resides at the core of Traditionalist art, which makes no distinction between the master and the craftsman, prioritizing the sacred above all else (Guénon, 2004a: 77-81).

Schuon emphasizes that no art is, in an absolute sense, a purely human undertaking; at its source lies revelation. Sacred art thus derives its essence directly from revelation, manifesting the ultimate truth in sacred form-becoming the visible and audible visage of revelation itself. Sacred art functions as a path that recalls to man his own center -imbued with divine love- and leads him once again to rediscover it. In this respect, art serves as a vehicle that guides man toward the center. Coomaraswamy, for his part, argues that to reduce art merely to an object of historical investigation or sentimental interpretation is an injustice to the inner subject who “knows the truth.” While historical studies of art may seem harmless, they risk obscuring the essential elements that made the very emergence and development of art possible (Coomaraswamy, 1995: 64, 65).

For Traditionalists, the act of artistic “making” (*poiesis*) signifies a kind of birth, and the created work becomes something that represents, recalls, and points to truth. Within this process of making lies a universal, though difficult to define, joy that can nonetheless be felt (Schuon, 2007: 29, 30) et for Guénon and many other traditionalists, art is not designed simply to provide humans with refined pleasures. When reduced to a mere object of aesthetic enjoyment, art

collapses into relativism and the narrow confines of subjective taste. Nor is art a hollow emotional outcry requiring ornate or obscure language. For Guénon, the essential and indispensable element of art is its function as a vehicle that points toward, and directs the soul to, authentic knowledge (Guénon, 2016: 66, 68).

Tradition's message is not confined solely to sacred texts or doctrines; sacred art and sacred science are two distinct manifestations that transmit divine knowledge and descend from above. According to Nasr, Traditionalist art is inseparably tied to *scientia sacra*, which bears both the qualities of knowledge and the sacred; hence, science and art cannot be divorced from one another. Such art is not only expressed through human actions but also resonates with symbolism rooted in revelation itself. In contrast to the modern ideal of "art for art's sake," Traditionalist art manifests as "art for man" -which, in its deepest sense, is equivalent to "art for God" (Nasr, 2011: 265-267).

For Guénon, just as the laws of nature fall within the domain of the sciences, so too do the principles of art constitute applications and reflections of these scientific truths. Therefore, whatever is valid in the sciences must equally hold in the arts. For this reason, in every normal civilization, alongside what Westerners call the "traditional sciences," there have also existed "traditional arts," which are less familiar to modern consciousness. At the heart of these arts lies rhythm, practiced in diverse forms, and intrinsically linked to number, that is, arithmetic. Yet the arithmetic in question corresponds not to modern quantitative calculation but to the Traditionalist conception of number. This is most clearly illustrated in the phonetic arts: poetry, whose entire structure rests upon rhythmic sequence, stands as the paradigmatic example. Its rhythmic nature has at times been described as "the language of the gods," and this characteristic persisted from periods when literature was not considered an autonomous genre down to later times. With music, too, despite its numerical essence having been distorted and severed from tradition, it continues to be fundamentally recognized as a numerical art. In many ancient civilizations -particularly in the Far East- musical cycles were believed to correspond to the rhythmic order of the cosmos, with the movements of celestial bodies being expressed through musical transformations. From this perspective, musical rhythm was seen as tied not only to social and human order but also to cosmic motion (Guénon, 2016: 67).

It is in this context that Nasr highlights the profound spiritual influence exerted by the poetry of Rūmī and the Mawlawī ritual of *samāʿ* within Islamic civilization. He argues that just as one may be spiritually moved by the writings of St. John, it is inconceivable that such a person would remain unaffected by the poetry of Rūmī. Sacred art from diverse religions thus exerts a particular attraction upon the modern Westerner. Consequently, for the truly educated Westerner of today, sacred art must be recognized as a gateway opening onto the courts of both Eastern and Western religions (Chittick, 2012: 22). For Nasr, regardless of the religious context in which it emerges, art possesses a universal dimension that speaks to humanity at large. Within the Traditionalist perspective, art becomes an expression of a trans-traditional worldview, accessible to all who possess an aesthetic sensibility and a sincere desire to seek, discover, and appreciate beauty.

All of these analyses converge upon one essential conclusion: art, in its essence, is bound to the intellectual intuition of the artist, for art is not simply a technical ability but a mode of knowing intrinsically connected to the truth of being. Traditional art therefore belongs directly to this domain of knowledge. As such, the Traditionalist conception of art is scientific in nature

(Nasr, 2011: 278). Nearly all representatives of the school recall St. Thomas' dictum, *ars sine scientia nihil* ("art without knowledge is nothing"), thereby underscoring that art must be understood within the framework of either *scientia* (knowledge) or *scientia sacra* (sacred science). In this regard, the comparison between sacred art and Traditionalist art assumes special significance. According to Schuon, Traditionalist art emerges from a lofty power that unites inspiration descending from heaven with the creative act shaped by local genius. Yet this process of creation is always framed by the principles of sacred science. Thus, every sacred art is necessarily Traditionalist, though not every Traditionalist art attains the rank of sacred art (Nasr, 2011: 265, 266).

5. The Human-Artist in the Context of Social Benefit

One of the most significant themes addressed by the representatives of the Traditionalist school is the human being and the mission he undertakes within the cosmos. According to the Traditionalists, who ascribe a metaphysical meaning to human existence, man can grasp his true vocation in this world only through a Traditionalist perspective (Nasr, 2011: 171). This understanding reveals, on both epistemological and cosmological levels, the close relationship between human existence, artistic activity, and aesthetic thought. Consequently, to interpret the Traditionalist conception of art, it is first necessary to clarify the meaning they ascribe to human existence.

Human's mission in this world is situated on both horizontal and vertical planes-physical on the one hand, and metaphysical on the other (Hasanpur, Dihgânî, Avanî, 1398: 119-144). The human being thus functions as a bridge between these two domains. For this reason, the fulfillment of his existential purpose requires access to a spiritual dimension, exemplified by his relationship with religion. Guénon describes the vertical (metaphysical) and horizontal (physical) dimensions as complementary rather than oppositional (Guénon, 2004: 40). Schuon, following this view, maintains that vertical enlightenment cannot be attained without achieving excellence on the horizontal plane (Schuon, 1984: 110). Taking this further, he stresses that man's vocation is to know the Absolute, for he was created precisely for the Absolute (Schuon, 1992: 82). From the Traditionalist standpoint, the Renaissance, the scientific revolution, and the Enlightenment all contributed to the obscuration of the spiritual dimension and the eclipse of humanity's relationship with the sacred. This development not only rendered the meaning of being human ambiguous but also inverted and distorted it (Sotillos, 2020: 140-141).

Traditionalist thought categorically rejects the confinement of man to a purely horizontal existence, even when such reduction is disguised under the rhetoric of freedom and power. For Guénon and other Traditionalists, man is the locus of the manifestation of the Divine Names and the vicegerent (*khalīfa*) of God on earth. His very nature is woven with the immutable principles of *tawḥīd*. Human felicity is attainable only when he recognizes and remains faithful to this nature. Acting in accordance with the divine will, man is thereby able to realize the potential dignity of the vicegerency bestowed upon him. Martin Lings characterizes man as the "heart" of the cosmos, while Schuon introduces distinctions between intellectual, ambitious, and emotional types of man, offering a nuanced account of the traditionalist conception of humanity.

In contrast to modern man, the traditional human being does not regard himself as the master of nature or as a mere creature of the earth. Since the sacralization of man is a shared feature

across all traditional doctrines, Nasr's portrait of the traditional human is consistently centered on the sacred. For him, the sacredness within man is identical with his orientation toward the eternal and immutable. The traditional human is inconceivable apart from this sense of the sacred, which is intrinsic to his very being. The sacred preserved in his essence resides above all in the intellect created to apprehend the Eternal. Such sacredness constitutes the very source of tradition; indeed, the traditional cannot be conceived apart from the sacred. By contrast, the individual deprived of this awareness cannot attain the Traditionalist horizon of vision (Nasr, 2011: 89).

Within traditionalist aesthetics, absolute fidelity to spiritual principles is imperative. Hence, every art form must be accompanied by a profound moral purpose. Nevertheless, some traditionalists caution that moral stance and art itself should not be conflated. Coomaraswamy, for instance, insists that art cannot by its nature be subject to moral judgment, for art belongs to the realm of knowledge rather than will (Coomaraswamy, 1956: 27, 28). Moral evaluation applies only to will, whereas art is itself a form of knowledge, one capable even of defining the very nature of morality. Just as revelation constitutes the primary source of moral principles, so too does art grounded in revelation share in the same authority and potency. Viewed from this perspective, the relationship between art and religion reflects their common origin and equal legitimacy. In this sense, Coomaraswamy's assertion that "art is religion, religion is art" functions as a key to understanding the high value ascribed to art by the school (Coomaraswamy, 1995: 60).

If both art and revelation are recognized as higher forms of knowledge, then the directions in which such knowledge may evolve through human agency can be observed in the history of art and religion. Though inherently good, these forms of knowledge are subject to corruption through the meanings imposed upon them by humankind. The loss of *gnosis* entails the decline of both analogical and anagogical capacities of perception, leading to the degradation of these domains of knowledge (Nasr, 2011: 277). The degeneration and decline observable in Traditionalist arts parallels the weakening of societies' spiritual values. The eclipse of the sapiential dimension of art has paved the way for what the school designates as "profane" forms of art (Nasr, 2011: 270). Consequently, within the Traditionalist framework, the artist's primary task is to convey such knowledge through authentic expression, producing works that serve both truth and utility. Coomaraswamy's reflections on how the artist must realize what is "true" and "useful" clearly articulate the nature of this responsibility.

This raises the question of whether the responsibilities imposed upon the artist restrict his freedom. Traditionalist thought, however, emphasizes that the artist must in essence be a free individual. Yet this freedom is not to be understood in the ordinary sense of the absence of obligation; rather, it signifies a higher form of liberty -freedom from material concerns- that distinguishes the artist from the tradesman. In this regard, one may recall the guild and *akhī* institutions where arts were practiced. Beneath the surface of commercial exchange and the master-apprentice relationship lay a deeper ethos: the primacy of social benefit. The extent to which these institutions upheld or departed from this ethos can be traced through the historical patterns of flourishing or corruption that accompanied their development (Şeker, 2011).

When the principle of utility is foregrounded, it becomes evident that Traditionalist art is carried out on the basis of its benefit to man. Nasr, for example, observes: "In traditional art, there is no notion of 'art for art's sake.' In traditional civilizations, there were no museums; no work of

art was ever produced merely for the sake of art” (Nasr, 2011: 270; Gazi-Haseni, 2013: 105-129). For him, the execution of art for man -who is God’s vicegerent- ultimately signifies “art for God.” In relation to production, this principle of utility indicates that the very foundation of artistic creation lies in benefit, such that production informed by art prioritizes value over profit. One of the most pointed critiques the school directs against modernity is that capitalism has eliminated this principle of benefit. For the traditionalists, therefore, production or industry devoid of art amounts to a form of barbarism. Schuon remarks that such barbarity, when embodied in an art severed from its spiritual dimension, leads the artist into individualistic and psychic tendencies, stripping art of its beneficent character and leaving it with a demonic (*luciferian*) visage. As Schuon underscores, in all traditional arts the work produced holds greater value than the artist’s personal identity, for what must appear in the essence of art is the message conveyed by the sacred itself. The traditional human being, who apprehends this message, seeks to construct a new world through art that reflects tranquility and inner harmony. According to Burckhardt, art not only opens the way toward the construction of such a world but also unveils its meaning and enables the comprehension of divine unity (Larijani, 2021: 339-362; Cihangired, 1401: 85-93).

6. Conclusion

This article has examined the reflections of the Traditionalist school on the relationship between art and society. Drawing on the thought of René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon, Titus Burckhardt, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, it has explored the meanings of art as sacred, Traditionalist, and profane, and within this framework, discussed the role of art in human perfection, the construction of social order, and the shaping of civilizational vision. Against the profane worldview engendered by modernity, the Traditionalist approach underscores the divine origin and metaphysical dimension of art, thereby seeking to manifest its profound significance at both the individual and social levels.

As an intellectual reaction to modernism, Traditionalism represents a return to primordial wisdom. Emphasizing the concept of *philosophia perennis*, Traditionalist thinkers placed art and metaphysics at the center of their concerns, thereby attempting to provide an alternative to the secular tendencies of the modern world.

Critiquing the limitations of modern science, the Traditionalist school posits in its stead a metaphysically grounded conception of *scientia sacra*. For Nasr and Guénon, the fact that modern science takes into account only empirical realities narrows the scope of human existence, whereas sacred science comprehends the human being in both his physical and metaphysical dimensions. In this regard, it is concluded that while modernity promotes a knowledge system detached from truth, Traditionalism upholds a holistic and sacred epistemology.

For the representatives of the school, the sacred constitutes the primary point of reference for both knowledge and art. Schuon’s analysis of the qualities of the sacred and Nasr’s emphasis on *scientia sacra* demonstrate that neither science nor art can be meaningfully considered apart from metaphysical principles. Guénon’s characterization of modern science as “intellectual myopia” strikingly underscores the modern mind’s rupture with the sacred.

Within this framework, art emerges as a force capable of constructing social order, but when severed from virtue, it can equally become a source of social catastrophe. The discussions

extending from the concept of *tekhnê* in ancient Greece, through Plato's evaluations, and onward to modern critiques of science and art, illustrate that art is not merely a technical skill but an activity that acquires meaning only when integrated with morality. This indicates the close relationship between humanity's existential mission and artistic activity. Indeed, the anthropological perspectives of Guénon, Schuon, Burckhardt, and Nasr emphasize art's role in both human perfection and the shaping of society. For these thinkers, art is not a vehicle of individual pleasure alone but a means of guiding man toward his center while prioritizing social benefit. In contrast to the individualism and utilitarian detachment of modern art, Traditionalist thought proposes the ideal of "art for God" as a path toward social balance and harmony.

In conclusion, the traditionalist perspective holds that art occupies a central role in the constitution of social order, while its detachment from the sacred results in destructive consequences for both the individual and society. Alongside its critique of modernity, this approach reveals the multilayered functions of art, ranging from the cultivation of individual perfection to the promotion of collective benefit. The study thus arrives at the ultimate conclusion that art, in its essence, is a form of knowledge oriented toward truth; it is therefore not merely an aesthetic phenomenon, but also a metaphysical means of transformation for both humanity and society.

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