

Martin Lawes – Oil Paintings

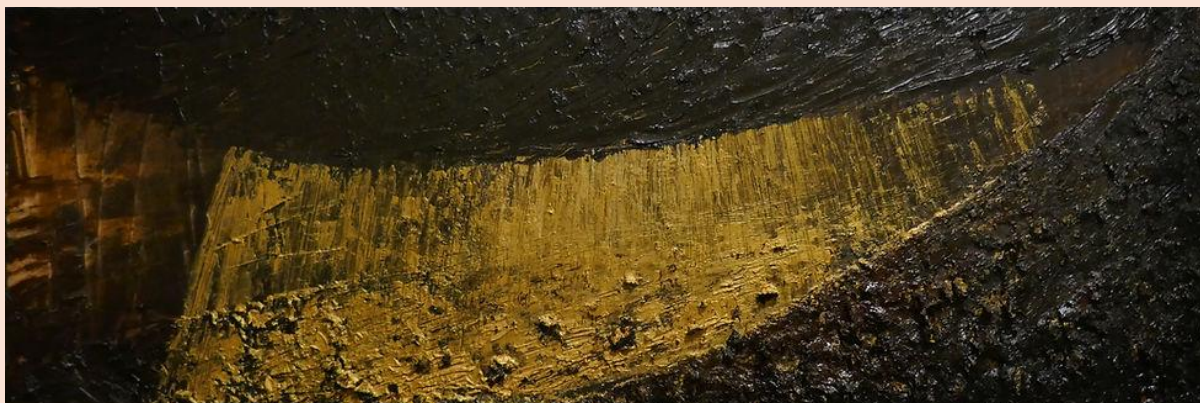
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Creating art through 'becoming music'

Painting title: Graal - Lumen Naturae 3

Music used: Wagner - Lohengrin (Prelude, act 1, extract)

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1kC6SkDN1bjTHJumYI5cMK4EdIML2ORDi/view?usp=sharing>



This was painted listening repeatedly to an extract from the prelude to Wagner's *Lohengrin* (Act I) depicting the descent of the *Holy Grail* from Heaven to Earth. In the Medieval German epic *Parzival* by Wolfram von Eschenbach, the *Holy Grail* is brought down to Earth by a group of neutral angels who refused to take sides when Lucifer rebelled against God. This esoteric version of the Grail legend moves beyond the dualism of orthodox Western religious traditions there is an ongoing conflict of good and evil. Mythologist Joseph Campbell suggests these neutral angels described by von Eschenbach to represent the transcendent principle - a force that reconciles pairs of opposites (such as good/evil, heaven/earth) rather than choosing between them.

At the beginning of Wagner's prelude, high pitched, divided violins represent the golden light of the *Grail* as it appears from above and gradually begins its descent. In the extract I used, nevertheless, which comes from a little in the piece before the climax, the music also seems to rise with a sublime nobility from the earth in the lower strings. It is as if the *Grail's* golden light is also emergent from below – as though inherently present in soul, body and matter, its descent from above at the same time an emergence from below. Linked to the way I experience the music, my painting and several others have *lumen naturae* in the title. I have several different interlinked associations to this discussed below, where the theme of death-rebirth is also a central aspect.

Alchemy, Jung and the *lumen naturae*

One obscure but important ancient tradition in which this theme of death-rebirth is prominent is alchemy, a kind of mystical chemistry practiced in centuries past which was the forerunner of modern chemistry. The alchemists sought to create the *lapis exillis* or Philosopher's Stone,

which can be associated with the *Holy Grail*, the *lapis exillis* a mythical substance that it was believed would be able to transform base metals into gold, cure disease and prolong life.

In the twentieth century, Carl Jung the Swiss psychiatrist and psychotherapist understood alchemy as psycho-spiritual metaphor. He believed that images of gold in alchemical texts and in his client's dreams, for example, were symbolic expressions of the origin and goal of individuation. This is the process of becoming whole as a human being in which opposites such as light and dark are brought together and indeed transcended.

In alchemy, as psychologically understood by Jung, *lumen naturae* can be associated with the experience of an innate, hidden light within darkness which guides, animates, and structures psychic, natural, and dream life. This 'light of nature', where darkness itself is experienced to be self-luminous, needs to be distinguished from external, intellectual, or divine light which indeed obscures the former. The experience of the *lumen naturae*, which may come in times of prolonged inner darkness, suffering and despair (death), transcends the everyday experience of light and dark being opposites which has dominated Western consciousness and orthodox Western Religious traditions where the forces of light (god) and darkness (devil) are understood to be in conflict. Transcending such a dualistic paradigm, the *lumen naturae* is apprehended to be "no longer light's contrary but a point of possibility in which light and dark both have their invisible origin" (Marlan, 2005, *The black sun: The alchemy and art of darkness*, p. 209).

Levy in his article *The Light of Darkness* suggests that "to see the light that is hidden in the darkness is to become conscious, which, alchemically speaking, frees the spirit that is hidden and trapped inside the materialized world ... The *lumen naturae* is not the light that we see, it is the invisible light by which we see". Elaborating this, Jung in his *Alchemical Studies* describes how the medieval alchemist

was seeking for something that would give him a hold on the dark, body-bound nature of man, on the soul which, intangibly interwoven with the world and with matter, appeared before itself in the terrifying form of strange, demoniacal figures and seemed to be the secret source of life-shortening diseases. The Church might exorcise demons and banish them, but that only alienated man from his own nature, which, unconscious of itself, had clothed itself in these spectral forms. Not separation of the natures but union of the natures was the goal of alchemy ... This principle is pagan in feeling and an expression of nature worship. Nature not only contains a process of transformation - it is itself transformation. It strives not for isolation but for union ... Here the opposites unite what the light from above had sternly divided.

The death-rebirth rhythm of creativity

Death-rebirth also features in the way the creative process in the arts is understood by Anton Ehrenzweig in his seminal 1967 publication *The Hidden Order of Art*. To create an aesthetic satisfying and meaningful painting resonant of the depths of human experience, Ehrenzweig describes how the artist needs to surrender everyday conscious functioning and control to 'the powers of the deep'. As a result of this inner 'death', the artist enters a 'waking dream state' in which they 'become their painting' experientially, feeling as if it is almost a part of them. In this state, relying more on unconscious than conscious processes, the artist develops and integrates all the painting's different elements to create a satisfying whole that is more than the sum of its parts. The painting becomes imbued with subjectivity in the process as rebirth is experienced.

The creative arts function to open consciousness to dream 'awake'. As a result of the type of creative surrender discussed, a painting as 'vehicle of dream' can generate a deeper sense of *Reality*, *Truth*, and *Presence* than is normally experienced not only for the artist but potentially for the viewer also. In this way, successfully integrated art works can affirm both the

light and dark aspects of life, whether as internally or externally experienced, beyond what may otherwise be possible.

A successful painting in the sense discussed is experienced to have a boundless/infinite depth that is simultaneously enveloping and expanding. This reflects what the artist experiences where at unconscious depth opposites such as life and death are undifferentiated. Whilst the associated sense of envelopment may potentially threaten as entrapment in death (and the painting repulse the viewer in this aspect), this is balanced by a sense of limitless freedom and expansion associated with rebirth that transcends the limitations of individuality, space and time. As a 'vehicle of dream', the artwork functions as a kind of creative womb, or rather as a potential tomb that becomes womb once the work is fully integrated and death-rebirth has been worked through.

Associated with this type of experience of art is also the sense of a painting having an endless meaningfulness that can never be exhausted however often it is looked at. The painting has a life of its own where the essential meaning is both before and beyond words, is at once personal and universal, and inexhaustible. Through the type of creative process described, a painting exists as an irreducible integrated totality that cannot be reduced to its parts. The painting presents lived experience in a way which can have no other form or expression. Words may be able to embellish the painting, but they cannot be substituted for it. Indeed, trying to capture the essential meaning of such a painting in words only diminishes it.

In this inexhaustible meaningfulness of a painting as irreducible totality, undifferentiated aspects of form-play are often important. Where an old master painting may 'on the surface' be composed of differentiated elements of form such as people, objects, buildings, and landscape associated with its representational meaning – standing up close the brushwork may look messy, crude, unfinished and undifferentiated, more like an abstract painting. If the artist had attempted to tidy up the paintwork to 'improve' the painting, they would have killed its 'life'. In some contemporary painting, undifferentiated form-play is more dominant 'on the surface'. For example, in a great abstract painting by Jackson Pollock there may be no obvious elements of representational form. The work may nevertheless feel very alive when the viewer is able to intimate that some ineffable rhythm seems to underpin and run through its apparent surface chaos. The painting has a *hidden order* as Ehrenzweig describes of all art resonant of the depths of human experience, whether a Rembrandt self-portrait, a Van Gogh landscape or such an abstract painting. Every element connects and interpenetrates with every other as part of the painting as integrated, irreducible whole.

Paleolithic cave art

In his seminal publication *The Mind in the Cave: Consciousness and the Origins of Art*, Lewis-Williams discusses his controversial but also fascinating theory of palaeolithic cave painting which began to appear in western Europe around 45,000 years ago. He associates this earliest flowering of human art-making with shamanic experience in altered states of consciousness (trance/dream states) resulting in visions of animals that had spiritual significance. These visionary experiences he believes occurred in the darkness of the caves into which the shamanic practitioners ventured and which they then painted on the cave walls. Lewis-Williams believes these earliest spiritual practitioners (priests) experienced the cave walls to represent a membrane between their world and the spirit world from which the visions seemed to come. When lit by torch light the painted images might easily seem to appear and disappear out of the cave wall as the light fell on them.

In shamanism, death-rebirth experience is central. It can be associated with profound spiritual transformation where an individual sheds old identities, traumas, and fears to be 'reborn' with greater wisdom, power, and connection to the spiritual realm. The shaman lets go of the old self to align with a more authentic, integrated experience of living - similar to natural cycles of decay and renewal.

Filmmaker Werner Herzog, discussing his film about Paleolithic cave art, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, describes the caves to represent for him ‘the awakening of the modern human soul’. Margaret Iversen in her essay *Sculpting Darkness*, refers to contemporary sculptor Anthony Gormley’s interest in Paleolithic cave art, where he describes how his own work potentially resonates with “deep memories or structures to do with birth and death: the womb and the tomb”. In this, art can potentially transform consciousness by invoking the analogy between entering the mysterious space of a cave and entering the dark inner space of the imagination, caves representing the portal to the unconscious mind and experiences of primordial spirituality, where the experience of simultaneous envelopment/entrapment-expansion/freedom described by Ehrenzweig is apparently also a central preoccupation of Gormley’s.

Rembrandt - *The Three Crosses* (etching, fourth state)

Another influence on my painting is Rembrandt’s remarkable etching in its final state, where the artist dramatically reworked the copper plate to obscure the chaotic scenes of earlier states (versions) of the work in darkness. This reworking represented a profound shift from a narrative, crowded depiction of the crucifixion to a more symbolic and even apocalyptic scene, an ominous meditation on light, death, and redemption with vestiges of older figures still partially visible under the new work.

My impression is that the artist probably engaged very deeply with the death-rebirth rhythm of creativity as Ehrenzweig describes to create his masterpiece, where earlier states of the etching needed to be completely transformed. The theme of the etching is indeed in one sense the creative process itself with its death-rebirth rhythm, this the most essential content of all art ultimately according to Ehrenzweig. It is as if Rembrandt is opening us (and himself) to a realization of something deeper, more universal and undifferentiated, the painting not simply a



representation of the universal death-rebirth theme in Christian guide, the painting’s theme in this sense bound to historical and cultural context, and to a particular religious tradition and its specific narratives. Rather Rembrandt seems to have created a living embodiment of death-rebirth as psycho-spiritual experience in the very act of creating that for me, at least, reaches before and beyond the Christian reference as something limited and limiting.

The print reminds me of a cave painting illuminated in the darkness where tomb becomes womb. The mysterious, yet very compelling figure with the sword/lance on horseback moving from left to right, usually thought to represent the centurion described in traditional accounts, reminds me of Manjushri, the Buddhist Bodhisattva of Great Wisdom whose sword is said to cut through ignorance, and who in disguised form seems to traverse the scene as if from some other dimension.

Creative transformation: Rembrandt - *The Three Crosses* (etching, 1655) & Picasso - *Ecce Homo*, d'apres Rembrandt (etching, 1970)



My own painting process almost always involves the image I create being considerably transformed of over time, Rembrandt's *The Three Crosses* illustrating how this can occur in its different states.

Picasso's remarkable and inspired transformation of another Rembrandt etching - *Christ Presented to the People* - illustrates creative transformation in an especially compelling manner. Rembrandt's original, sometimes considered to stand at the summit of the Western printmaking tradition, is a monumental, dramatic etching depicting a biblical scene.

Whilst the derivation of Picasso's etching from the Rembrandt is clear enough, his transformation of it is much more than a straightforward reworking. Picasso, in his late period, has transformed the traditional dramatic religious scene into something more secular, theatrical, personal and dreamlike. He replaces the biblical crowd with a medley of characters from his own life and art, including circus performers, musketeers, and figures reminiscent of his early works.

Such is the nature of unconsciously driven transformation in art-making, both in drawing on the work of others and during the creative process itself which for me occurs as a painting is sometimes radically transformed in the dream-like process of creating it. My paintings are not planned in advance but evolve stage by stage out of the experience of having 'become the music' I'm working with. Within the process, it is often necessary to let go of established elements of the composition that may be very satisfying where the whole nevertheless doesn't work so that reworking and transformation are required. This involves trusting my inner creative process, working with creative 'accidents' and so on.



General background information about my approach to painting

As a creative arts psychotherapist and practitioner of Music and Imagery (MI), a psychotherapeutic approach which involves supporting clients to create art-work whilst listening to music to explore their inner experience, I have developed my own practice as an oil painter using a similar technique which integrates art-making with music listening.

My paintings involve my being intuitively drawn to music which I then listen to repeatedly whilst I paint. For this I use short extracts of music that is especially meaningful to me, each extract lasting around a minute and a half. I typically repeat such an extract for several hours at a time as I work on a painting, the process often repeated on many different occasions over a period of weeks and sometimes months until the painting is finished. Repeating the music never feels like repeating the same experience. Rather it is a way of ever deepening into the present moment experience of the music until I feel that I have 'become the music' in a way that

transforms my state of consciousness. It is only out of this that the painting emerges authentically in the way I work. 'Becoming the music' involves feeling immersed in it as though I am living within the music, continually aware of its transformative presence.

Titles and meanings

The titles of my paintings are intended to be both evocative and ambiguous, so as not to convey a precise meaning but be open to many possibilities of interpretation. I don't consider the paintings to represent the music but to arise from my having 'become it' in a way that is personal to me as I explore universal human themes. There is often a connection with the music's meaning for the composer, or a connection with the text set, though this may not be immediately obvious. It is in any case for the viewer to create their own possibly very different meaning.

I will end with a favourite quotation about meaning in art which gets to what is most essential I believe. This comes from Ken Wilber's 2001 publication *The Eye of Spirit: An Integral Vision for a World Gone Slightly Mad*:

Let me return to what art is finally all about. When I directly view, say, a great Van Gogh, I am reminded of what all superior art has in common: the capacity to simply take your breath away . . . you are changed somehow, maybe just a little, maybe a lot; but you are changed. No wonder that for the East and West alike, until recent times, art was often associated with profound spiritual transformation.

. . . When we look at any beautiful object (natural or artistic), we suspend all other activity, and we are simply aware, we only want to contemplate the object. . . In that contemplative awareness, our egoic grasping in time comes momentarily to rest. We relax into our basic awareness. We rest with the world as it is, not as we wish it to be. We are face to face with the calm, the eye in the centre of the storm. We are not agitating to change things; we contemplate the object as it is. Great art has this power to grab your attention and suspend it: we stare, sometimes awestruck, sometimes silent, but we cease the restless movement that otherwise characterises our every waking moment.

It doesn't matter what the actual content of the art is; not for this. Great art grabs you, against your will, and then suspends your will. You are ushered into a quiet clearing, free of desire, free of grasping, free of ego, free of self-contradiction. And through that opening or clearing in your own awareness may come flashing higher truths, subtler revelations, profound connections. For a moment you might even touch eternity; who can say otherwise, when time itself is suspended in the clearing that great art creates in your awareness?

. . . Great art suspends the reverted eye, the lamented past, the anticipated future: we enter with it into the timeless present; we are with God today, perfect in our manner and mode, open to the riches and the glories of a realm that time forgot, but that great art reminds us of: not by its content, but by what it does in us: suspends the desire to be elsewhere. And thus it undoes the agitated grasping in the heart of the suffering self, and releases us - maybe for a second, maybe for a minute, maybe for all eternity - releases us from the coil of ourselves.

That is exactly the state that great art pulls us into, no matter what the actual content of the art itself - bugs or Buddhas, landscapes or abstractions, it doesn't matter in the least. In this particular regard - from this particular context, great art is judged by its capacity to take your breath away, take your self away, take time away, all at once.

And whatever we mean by the word "spirit" - let us just say . . . that for each of us it involves our ultimate concern - it is in that simple awestruck moment, when great art enters you and changes you, that spirit shines in this world just a little more brightly than it did the moment before. (Wilber 2001: 122-124)