

## A MODERN ARTIST WHO SPEAKS TO OUR TIME

DEAN L. FRANTZ

Peter Birkhauser was an artist who was practically unknown even in his homeland of Switzerland. Many who saw his paintings did not appreciate them. Art critics wrote caustic comments about his work. But a psychiatrist who was in touch with archetypal images and their affect on our psyche once told me, "After his death, Birkhauser will become known through his paintings as the greatest interpreter of the inner life in the 20th century." Posthumously, this artist is now being given the praise which was withheld from him during his lifetime. Through the book, *Light from Darkness*,<sup>1</sup> which is a collection of some of his finest works, increasing numbers of people are learning to know his paintings, and are deeply moved by them.

George Bernard Shaw once said "You use a mirror to see your face, you use works of art to see your soul." The paintings of Peter Birkhauser help us peer into our soul. They reveal to us those shadowy sides of ourselves which we often pretend are not there. They portray those inner figures which populate our psyche. They provide that link with the infinite on which Jung placed such a great importance. They speak of the cosmic dimensions of life beyond the space-time boxes in which we live.

Why do his paintings affect people at such deep levels? The best characterization that can be made of Birkhauser's paintings is that they spring from the archetypes of the collective unconscious. Jung once wrote, "The concept of the archetype derives from the repeated observation that the myths and fairy tales of the world's literature contain definite motifs which crop up everywhere. These typical images and associations are what I call archetypal ideas. The

**FCRP members may borrow the book, *Light from Darkness*, as well as many other books, from the Dora Willson Collection of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Library, 1515 Cherry Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102.**

**DEAN L. FRANTZ, a member of the Church of the Brethren and practising analyst in Fort Wayne, Indiana, wrote his diploma thesis for the Jung Institute in 1977 on "Meaning for Modern Man in the Paintings of Peter Birkhauser".**

more vivid they are, the more they will be colored by particularly strong feeling tones. This accentuation gives them a special dynamism in our psychic life. They impress, influence, fascinate us."<sup>2</sup>

Obviously, the arena in which the power of archetypal images is most frequently felt is in our dreams. Sometimes we have dreams which are so deeply numinous that we feel like Moses at the burning bush, when he was commanded to take off his shoes because he stood on holy ground.

But poetry, music, and art likewise have the capacity to evoke feelings of numinosity within us. Jung once described a particular kind of archetype, which he called archetypes of transformation. "They are not personalities, but are typical situations, places, ways and means that symbolize the kind of transformation in question. These archetypes are true and genuine symbols that cannot be exhaustively interpreted. . . They are genuine symbols precisely because they are ambiguous, full of half-glimpsed meanings and in the last resort inexhaustible."<sup>3</sup> Jung described a symbol as the intimation of a meaning beyond the level of our present powers of comprehension. Symbols do not speak in specifics, but they point us toward meaning. They prod, they provoke, they push us to search for that meaning towards which the symbol points. Herein lies the force and vitality of a symbol which is a bridge between the conscious and the unconscious, a link between the known and the unknown, a connector between the rational and the non-rational. The symbol is that which connects the ego with the Self, and thus serves as a vehicle for getting in touch with the deeper levels of the psyche.

As Jung said, "The spiritual adventure of our time is the exposure of human consciousness to the undefined and the indefinable." Art is one means whereby we are exposed to that which can not be defined, and to forces which move and shape us in the depths of our beings.

In his introduction to *Woman's Mysteries* Jung wrote, "Whenever the archetype clothes itself with adequate symbols, which is not always the case, it takes hold of the individual in a startling way, creating a condition of being 'deeply moved', the consequences of which may be immeasurable."<sup>4</sup>

Symbolic art, as well as dreams, possessing a numinous quality, can speak to us in ways which may lead us to re-evaluation,

re-orientation of our lives, and a re-ordering of priorities. This is not true of all art, however. There are paintings which are deliberately created by the artist to achieve a particular result. In contrast, the kind of art I am describing, and which the paintings of Birkhauser represent, is art which springs from its creator as Pallas Athene sprang fully armed from the head of Zeus. Here the artist is seized upon by images which he could never consciously have created, which his own will could never have brought into being. Then the artist who paints from the depths of his own unconscious, who allows the archetypes to shape his paintings, such an artist becomes a translator of the eternal, a human receptacle for extra-human contents, a finite being to whom the infinite has been entrusted. Such an artist was Peter Birkhauser, driven to paint his dreams, visions, and fantasies, putting on canvas those dark, mysterious, and often overwhelming forces which erupted from his unconscious.

In his autobiography Jung wrote, "The creative person has little power over his own life. He is not free. He is captive and driven by his daimon."<sup>5</sup> Erich Neumann in *Art and the Creative Unconscious* says, "We know that the creative power of the unconscious seizes upon the individual with the autonomous force of an instinctual drive and takes possession of him without the least consideration for the individual, his life, his happiness, or his health."<sup>6</sup> He goes on to suggest that the careers of the great artists of our time are all, in greater or lesser degree, calvaries.

But if the artist is able to endure the suffering which is his lot, his art may be a means of bringing healing and renewal to his time. Like the prophets of ancient Israel, his message may not be appreciated, because it is seen as a critique of culture. But in the larger perspective, what the artist says to us through his paintings may be precisely what is necessary for our individual and collective health.

In his earlier years, Birkhauser painted commercial art to make a living. Somewhere in the midpoint of his life, he became disturbed and distraught. He began to record his dreams. In one of his early dreams, the artist and his wife were caught in a crowd of people moving towards the right. Then suddenly two huge giants appeared who were going towards the left. Birkhauser and his wife followed them but it was difficult because the crowd was moving in another direction. They continued to follow the giants and finally, after

much difficulty, they were led to a banquet table where a great feast had been prepared for them.

This dream came at a time when Birkhauser's psychic energy had come to a standstill. Another dream was that of a strange woman being in bed with him. He was very tired. This unknown woman told him that he must get up. He protested that he was too tired to get out of bed. However, she insisted and forced him to leave his bed, saying to him "Now you must seek the blue light."

Then came a dream which proved to be the turning point in his life and artistic career. This dream portrayed a man with a split face, a wound from his forehead down through his chin. One eye suggested his inner suffering, and the other eye looked like that of a madman. Birkhauser was frightened by this ghastly figure, and ran towards his home. When he reached his home, he locked all the doors and windows. But then he heard this man in the street outside his home, asking the neighbors where Birkhauser lived, and the artist knew there was no escape from him.

A lengthy period of time passed before he could summon the courage to paint this fearsome man, whose features tormented him. But at last he committed to canvas this wounded man, and from that moment on, his paintings depicted his inner world.

This kind of art which I have described, and which Birkhauser left as his creative legacy to the world, has certain values which we now examine. When life becomes one-sided, or over-balanced, or adopts a false attitude, our dreams become a means of restoring the psychic balance. Jung often pointed out that art frequently anticipated psychological changes before they came to the surface of collective awareness. Just as dreams help to bring about balance in our individual psyches, so art represents a process of self-regulation in nations and cultures.

Birkhauser's paintings compensate for this one-sidedness. They often portray those mysterious creatures which reside in our unconscious. They remind us of dimensions of our lives which we have neglected or forgotten. They vividly speak to us of the symbolic life which is becoming an endangered species in our time. Some of his paintings shock us into an awareness of that mysterious, invisible world of spirit which constantly impinges on our materialistic and rational world.

In a time when many people live only for today, his paintings point to a life with distant horizons. In a world where value is often determined by what can be seen, weighed, counted, and measured, his paintings suggest cosmic depths and dimensions far beyond the boundaries of what we can know with our five senses. Birkhauser's paintings are a reminder of the eternal and infinite in a world limited by space and time.

As Jung has said, "The creative process, so far as we are able to follow it at all, consists in the unconscious activation of an archetypal image, and in elaborating and shaping this image into the finished work. By giving it shape, the artist translates it into the language of the present, and so makes it possible for us to find our way back to the deepest springs of life. Therein lies the social significance of art; it is constantly at work educating the spirit of the age, conjuring up the forms in which the age is most lacking. The unsatisfied yearning of the artist reaches back to the primordial image in the unconscious which is best fitted to compensate the inadequacy and one-sidedness of the present. The artist seizes on this image and in raising it from deepest unconsciousness he brings it into relation with conscious values, thereby transforming it until it can be accepted by the minds of his contemporaries according to their powers."<sup>7</sup>

When I was writing my thesis for the Jung Institute in Zurich, I had the unique opportunity of observing and talking with visitors to an art gallery where Birkhauser's paintings were displayed. The responses of people to his paintings were most interesting, and I quote some of them to illustrate the particular values of art which has its origin in the unconscious, and specifically those values which are felt by those who are touched by Birkhauser's paintings.

A woman who saw these paintings for the first time said "The feeling from the paintings is very strong. It affects me unconsciously in ways I cannot describe. Birkhauser portrays powers we usually do not see."

An artist viewing the paintings said, "As art they leave something to be desired. But there is a spiritual message here. I want to run away, but I can't. I am compelled to confront what these pictures are saying to me."

A student commented, "Mr. Birkhauser has obviously not only

experienced the infinite, but he is able to record it. I have never been so touched—the message of the paintings is clear. They gripped me."

A contemporary author of Jungian books recently saw the book *Light from Darkness* for the first time. He later wrote me, "I have found the Birkhauser book a treasure. I examine a few pictures each morning as my way to start the day correctly."

Just as Birkhauser was moved to paint from the depths of his own psyche, so his paintings often put people in touch with depths they have forgotten, or have somehow brushed aside in their frenzied pace of life. These awesome paintings speak to the very heart and soul of human beings. It is virtually impossible to view his paintings without feeling some deep inner stirrings.

Another woman who saw Birkhauser's art for the first time said, "When I walked into the room, it was as if I had been here before. It seemed as if I had always known these paintings." Another person who had seen the paintings once, and then returned again said, "I had to return, because I had two dreams about these paintings after I saw them the first time. I simply had to return."

These experiences relate to Jung's statement that, "The impact of an archetype, whether it takes the form of immediate experience or is expressed through the spoken word, stirs us because it summons up a voice that is stronger than our own. Whoever speaks in primordial images speaks with a thousand voices; he enthrals and overpowers, while at the same time he lifts the idea he is seeking to express out of the occasional and the transitory into the realm of the ever-enduring. He transmutes our personal destiny into the destiny of mankind, and evokes in us all those beneficent forces that ever and anon have enabled humanity to find a refuge from every peril and to outlive the longest night."<sup>8</sup>

Another person moved by the paintings said to me later, "These paintings gave me a new insight into life. They helped me understand what life is all about. I was tired when I went to see the paintings, but after seeing them, I forgot about being tired. They did something for me. I could not sleep after seeing them."

We should not be surprised, then, to discover the healing power in this kind of art, and especially in these paintings of Birkhauser.

Their last public exhibit was opened with a reception. The speaker on this occasion suggested that paintings such as these were literally "medicine for the soul".

Birkhauser suffered greatly during his lifetime, but his personal agony resulted in paintings which are a force for renewal and regeneration. Neumann writes, "The individual history of every creative man is always close to the abyss of sickness; he does not, like other men, tend to heal the personal wounds involved in all development by an increased adaptation to the collectivity. His wounds remain open, but his suffering from them is situated in depths from which another curative power arises, and this curative power is the creative process. As the myth puts it, only a wounded man can be a healer, a physician. Because in his own suffering the creative man experiences the profound wounds of his collectivity and his time, he carries within him a regenerative force capable of bringing forth a cure not only for himself but also for the community."<sup>9</sup>

Jung often spoke of the need to stand the tension between the opposites. He once said that another world war might be prevented if enough people could endure the awful stress which the opposites place upon us. Who knows—perhaps Birkhauser's paintings will become a healing force in our world, to mediate, to resolve, to bring together, to unite those terrible forces which even now threaten our world. If his paintings bring healing to some individuals who have been deeply wounded, or if they create a climate for the release of healing energies in our culture, then the life of Peter Birkhauser will not have been in vain.

His paintings defy interpretation. They do not carry a specific message, but their impact is unforgettable. Jung said "The work of the artist meets the psychic needs of the society in which he lives, and therefore means more than his personal fate, whether he is aware of it or not. Being essentially the instrument of his work, he is subordinate to it, and we have no right to expect him to interpret it for us. He has done his utmost by giving it form, and must leave the interpretation to others and to the future. A great work of art is like a dream; for all its apparent obviousness it does not explain itself and is always ambiguous. A dream never says 'you ought' or 'this is the truth'. It presents an image in much the same way as nature allows a plant to grow, and it is up to us to draw conclusions. If a person has a

nightmare, it means he is either too much given to fear or too exempt from it; if he dreams of a wise old man, it means he is either too much of a pedant or else in need of a teacher. In a subtle way both meanings come to the same thing, as we realize when we let a work of art act upon us as it acted upon the artist. To grasp its meaning, we must allow it to shape us as it shaped him."<sup>10</sup>

For two years I talked frequently with Peter Birkhauser about his life and his paintings. Some idea of the inner strength of this remarkable artist may be seen in this biographical note which he shared with me. He told me that during the years of World War II there were many times when his shoes had holes in them and he did not have the money to repair them. But he continued to work in the analytical process with his analyst because he realized that work with his own unconscious was more important than anything else.

When people criticized his paintings, he replied "I don't mind, since I am no longer eager to be accepted as an artist. At one time, I had the ambition to become known as a great painter. But now my only concern is to fulfill my task, to make visible the contents of the unconscious which are brought to me."

I know many people who have been deeply moved by Birkhauser. He has a way of speaking to the inner needs of our soul. With the passage of time, I believe Birkhauser's paintings will speak increasingly, not only to individuals, but to collective consciousness as well, because they truly are medicine for the souls of the whole human race.

#### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Birkhauser, Peter. *Light from Darkness: The Paintings of Peter Birkhauser*, Boston, Birkhauser Verlag, 1980.

<sup>2</sup>Jung, C.G. *Collected Works*, Princeton, N.J. Princeton University Press Vol. 10, par. 847.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. CW 9a, par. 80.

<sup>4</sup>Harding, Esther, *Woman 's Mysteries*, New York: Bantam Books, 1973, p.x.

<sup>5</sup>Jung, C.G., *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Recorded and edited by Aniela Jaffe, New York, Vintage Books, Alfred A. Knopf and Random House, 1961, p. 357.