

# Form and Conceptual Transfiguration in Art

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## Abstract

*In this article we try to reveal the spiritual virtues of the artistic form showing that, by means of the transition from the natural form to the one built by the creator, the evolution from a neutrally paradigmatic concept (which may be found between the eidos created by the divine intellect) to an axiologically elaborated and vested one (“born” within the creator’s deepest self) is carried out as well. The artistic step, whereby the utensil is aesthetically taken (from its pragmatic use), allows for a genuine conceptual transfiguration, an inclusive excellence designed for a spiritual integration with a universal goal. To this aim, three short examples highlight the rationality of art and its spiritual teleology.*

**Keywords:** *form; concept, art, transfiguration, artistic step.*

Between the concrete expressive categories, beauty can generally take in representative arts, the form plays probably the most important role as it succeeds in embodying the feature of essentiality conveyed not only by the technical hierarchy of aperceptive phenomenology of the purely aesthetical contemplative act, but mostly by the order of significance imposed by the exigency of comprehension, correlated as well to the needs of composition. Colours, proportions and harmony pass to the background assuming a functional dependence toward the requirements of the beautiful form, thus subordinately integrating to the creative logic, which dedicates to this value landmark a load of significance and a thematic concentration according to its right of pre-eminence. To the extent that they serve the form, these related elements enrich the image presented to the aesthetic appreciation with particularising nuances, which enhance the expressiveness of the schematic outline, of the general, of the essence, reflecting the more abstract model, which consists exclusively of contours through a process of suggestive individuation. They help the form to gain identity; they

make the definition more concrete and prepare the vivid relation the contemplating spirit entertains with the work and its message by means of their evocative force. By contrast, the pure form opens the gate to the world of ideas to the aesthetic taste, it reveals the essence hidden behind any phenomenality, and it brings to the foreground the eidetic nucleus of what can be but represented, “played”, incarnated in the work. In the beautiful arts (painting, sculpture, architecture), the essences descend “in the body”; they are accessible by means of intuition and they encrypt in their overflowing content of the aesthetic fact the typical, invariable configuration of the general. The form makes the transition from the visual to the spiritual, embodying the noble “impoverishment” without which one cannot speak rigorously of ideality, structure, abstractness. Strained with materiality, the artistic phenomenon survives by means of the play of pure forms, by the universal significance that can be conveyed from the reality of its appearances (its concrete images).

Hence, despite the claims of the exclusivist aestheticism, which could imagine a kind of contemplation designed to an appreciation of form independent of concept), there is an indissoluble relation between the two, underlined by Immanuel Kant, which does not only rule over the laws of the faculty of judgement but also, according to a model recoverable in nature, the canons of the creative ritual of the artist. It is accepted that the intellect, according to the “simple necessity of its nature, meant to produce certain forms”<sup>1</sup>, creates for the faculty of judgement “forms suitable to the incarnation of a concept.”<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the form is in an intimate correlation with the concept due to role of cause which the latter comes to play (searching for the origin of the natural object “within a cause whose capacity to act is determined by means of concepts”, while its form needs to be “possible only by virtue of the laws of nature, that is of the laws we are able to know only by means of the intellect applied to objects of the senses, but for their empirical knowledge itself, compliant to their cause and effect, to assume concepts of reason”<sup>3</sup>). This is an idealist processed variant of the Aristotle’s notion of “formal cause” which, together with the “final cause”, illustrates the twofold manner of influencing by means of which, with the help of the divine hand, the concept “generates” the thing, combining quality with matter. Hence, the natural form follows the concept by virtues of their common origin and records a rational filiation all along the creation, which ties with invisible threads each existential

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<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critica facultății de judecare (Critique of judgment)*, Scientific and Encyclopedic Publishing House, 1981, p. 339.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 427.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 263.

detail to God's intellect. And the artistic form, gradually derived for the natural one, belongs to a network of conceptual knots, leaving both the subtleties of the expression and the notional manipulation at the creative man's mercy.

Initially close, the two types of form are growing apart as an independent aesthetic canon becomes clearer or as the artist detaches himself from a temporary legitimate mimesis, which may belong to a hard-to-avoid rigour of the conceptual framework ruling the rigours of expression. The artist, impressed by the natural beauty and guided by the conceptual heritage of transcendental extraction, has to face a reproductive task that translates the particular idea of each work in the universally artistic language where each contemplative nature finds itself. And he does so, while imitating the divine example, that he gives life to a noble inner projection by dressing the diffuse indeterminate of inspiration in constantly, clearly, intelligibly spiritual clothes. He thus takes the utensil from its strictly pragmatic functionality and turns it into artistic expression, vesting this appearance of immobility and limited objective relation with potentialities of significant evolution and with integrating perspectives, which bring it back to an order having a profoundly existential stake. Once this transition toward the aesthetic principle is done, "the form [...] has exceeded the utilitarian purpose of the adjusted object and has become form for form's sake, namely a work of art."<sup>4</sup> Thus, "once the function is overcome, the form was free to develop according to the new aesthetic principles or laws [...]"<sup>5</sup> and reaches the semiotic level of symbolism, directing its reference' to interpretations which suggest concepts within a spiritual interrelation which no longer reminds of states of affairs and phenomenality but determinations of immaterial essence. By means of this transition, what we may call the *artistic step* was done, and, whether it is at the exclusively subjective level (i.e., the creative person's change of attitude), or it defines a historical stage which humanity crossed at a certain moment, it is translated in the evolution from the first stage, the one of imitation, to a second stage, the stage of an interiorisation stimulating creativity and building rational contents ("the form has its own significance, that is it corresponds to an inner psychical need and it expresses this feeling"<sup>6</sup>). At this point, the affective (idealist) ingredient guarantees by means of an empathic participation a continuum between the supreme Creator and the human one, on the one hand, and between the instrumental stage and the artistic one, on the other. The human creation is freer than the one that has produced the

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<sup>4</sup> Herbert Read, *Originile formei în artă (The origins of form in art)*, Univers Publishing House, 1971, p. 79.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 84.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 82.

multiplicity of forms subjected to the natural laws, and the artistic step combines morphological elements in ever-newer aesthetic “equations,” so that the divine filiation becomes strictly principle-based, reducing itself to a parable and excluding mimesis. Moreover, the work of art is not merely addressed to satisfying the contemplating consciousness, but it has its springs in moments of inspiration generated by such satisfactions, it feeds itself with the feeling experienced under the empire of natural beauty.

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Should the form be the “result” of a concept that can be intuitable, then the transition of the artistic step actually happens from one concept to another as well, from a pre-existent notional model which determined the features and the way the form has appeared toward an elaborate concept, “born” in the artist’s deeper self, accurately represented by the form apparent in the work and each time grasped precisely and with hermeneutic accuracy by the comprehensive intelligence called to appreciate the aesthetic value. As the significance of the form is closely related to its concept, it is via this concept (hence, via its expressive apparition), that art can be generally interpreted and finds its reflection at the level of understanding, where the difference between the initial conceptual paradigm and the final notional incarnation of the creation carried out can be noticed. Each time, a stable natural concept can, in the artistic representation, be thus substituted by another (one richer in significance, in relations, in suggestive determinations of appearance), created by the mind of the artistic personality and handed over to contemplation with an exclusively aesthetic purpose, meant to arise pure feelings and to entertain the spiritual availability of the appreciation, in a complete detachment from factual implication. The two also make up a process with a somewhat developing trend where, by mediation of the form, a pure spiritual leap is gained, a turn from a notional pre-established given into a new concept, enhanced via the conjugated contribution of an aperceptive sensitivity and an ability to “invent” subordinate to the regulative inspirational idea. And the difference between the two defines the artistic step in a such way that the rational final product is not the result of a simple addition of notes and conceptual determinations, but a synthesis with its own identity and physiognomy, to which the artistic “intervention” conveyed intrinsic value, taking it out of the network of strictly theoretical relations and bringing it onto an axiological field of the defining colour and of hierarchical ordering. It will distinguish itself via the plus built and it will be given “complex” names, real descriptive structures consecrating essential truths regarding the work and its creator.

It is in this difference that one can truly read the freedom the artist allowed to himself, his strip of originality, the authentic face of his contribution, and one can recognise the marks of an ever-new trial to eternalise the moment of inspiration where one means nothing else but a daring project, a paradoxical instantiation, which opposes provisionally the artistic idea to the pre-existent common conceptual given. Without this revolutionary deviation, without this surprising deflection from the traditional fact, we shall never encounter the authentic artistic value and we shall never recognise novelty where all appearances provoke the hermeneutic talent or critical virtues of a disinterested appreciation. And the “idea” of the work leads the artist’s hand to the best expressive variant and ensures the rational quality of the cultural end-product by a correctly constructed form. It indicates the “plan” according to which, while adding a number of heterogeneous “data” to a nucleus abstracted from a diverse reality, the ensemble thus formed is reunited in order to reach an inter-faculty harmony, on the one hand, and a synthetic unity of the work, on the other. The author’s creative mark lies in the attributes of this elaborate concept, as they are freely composed and the interpretation of an artistic creation is to convey from itself and to explain this unique concept. It is an incomparable portrait that the generally paradigmatic concept acquires in the artistic version of that particular author. Therefore, even if the paradigmatic notion benefits from a universal eidetic definition, the artist presents an expression full of evocative particularities that make up together with this original nucleus the elaborate concept (protecting the spiritual plane of the work background).

It is quite often that the original concept is mistaken for the eidetic one as the artist can find his inspiration directly from influencing *eidōs* which cannot be found any longer among the natural objects, implying its extraction from the comparison of real examples. Then one can be entitled to speak about a conception of creation, about the vision translated in the work, about a “cerebral” attitude toward the artistic exercise, which demonstrates that the direct relation to essences is not exclusively reserved to the theoretician and does not represent the philosopher’s monopoly. Equally legitimate, the artist can resort – in his own way and by virtue of delegations specific to his craft – to the universal conceptual heritage, betting on the essence, as confident as the investigating reason when building its epistemological edifices. And he performs his task only when he reaches from the essence to a new notion, only when he realised a conceptual *transfiguration*, a metamorphosis by means of which an enriched content has been obtained.

Hence, the artistically elaborate concept is built on the skeleton of the paradigmatic one and assumes up to a point its formal limitations so as to find then a way to overtake them according to a modality which could include them, maintaining their steady significance as well as finding an adequate form to integrate them in something superior. Besides, this new concept entertains a special kind of trade with universality, as it contains integrating relations, which the simple functionality the paradigmatic one benefits from in nature, lacks. It is the result of the artistic step, which becomes from this perspective a spiritual step, whose rationality orients the entire endeavour toward the absolute, ascending a special and privileged step toward him. The spiritual significance of the artistic step translates this closeness which starts from the initial “will” of form and ends with a specifically aesthetic participation to universality, with an original way of placing oneself directly in the “play” of the most comprehensive harmony, with an uniquely ascending way to which the end of the road means complete and durable fulfilment. By means of art, man is closer to the absolute both as the beholder and as the creator, and he becomes a genuine pathfinder, avoiding the trodden way to access the land of essences by offering a new version of relating to them, by the indefatigable construction of new concepts. And the work is an image-based bridge (perceptible, visual) between the concept-paradigm and the concept-result, between the object inspiring the creator and the final conclusion of the interpreter, validating it by responding to man’s noble mission of being, here on Earth, God’s continuator, an imitator of His grand example.

In this conception, the absolute is the starting principle and final target of a spiritual exertion that makes every authentic artistic work a new connection offering to man an intermediate disposition, meaning a path to follow. He starts from a state of grace and incessantly tends to join it again. This can be translated at the reduced scale of every artistic creation in the mediation between the two concepts with a status of centrality, between two rational “representatives” of the spiritual eternity. It changes the very core of a general, hieratic given, whose nature is congeneric with the constant forms originating in the divine “laboratory” in order to reach a profoundly humanised *analogon*, where the universalistic conceptual fibre is not lost, but the consciousness gains spiritual state, subjectivity gains colour, the primordial eidetic core gains converted character. And this change represents a *conceptual transfiguration* carried out with exclusively artistic means, meant to find the ideal combination of suggestive techniques, to embody expressive “slyness” worthy of the span of the original parable. Transfiguration illustrates the determination accompanying the artistic step, as it is its faultless

barometer.

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*Transfiguration* makes the transition from a neutral (theoretical) concept to an axiologically vested one (no matter how paradoxical the wording may seem), to a concept which *means* something not only in the exclusively logical sense of denomination, but also in the subjective sense of affective participation, of mediation understanding by means of interiority, of a full circuit pervading the human being in his entirety (and which can engage him together with his sensitivity, talent, sympathetic availability). It roots in the sphere of feeling in order to extract suggestive determinations, to impress, to get the whole bunch of effects aiming at a participative, involved comprehension (which “receives” it doubled by acceptance and appreciative initiative of an aesthetic nature).

The phenomenon of the contrast of significance would be a self-evident example in this case. It can be carried out by combining various elements with divergent significance in an artistically created form that assumes a secondary harmony, finding a unifying interpretation to itself despite the antinomic substratum and even profiting from its expressive virtues. A portrait using the artistic media of contrast will benefit from highlighted features, unexpected results (e.g. stressing some characteristics by means of and in the presence of their opposing determinations), from the impression of the spectacular an assumed antithetic may offer or the feeling of tension an exposed polarity may suggest. Here the form is thus constructed so that the aesthetic appreciation may be aroused, so that the impact of the subadjacent message may be maximum, considering that an accentuated conative virtue of the work brings a surplus of value to it and makes the transmission of some meaning valences impossible to suggest in any other way. The contrast plays the role of building a concept where the synthesis of contraries has a precisely addressing role, which makes the contemplative intuition more easily overcome everything that could pertain to the kingdom of appearances, where the penetration “beyond” is facilitated by a deliberate and undignified urge to speed up the comprehensive endeavour (by a direct invitation, unavoids, toward a dialectic leap and an effort to unveil meaning). It produces a unifying transfiguration that gathers opposing paradigmatic concepts in order to reveal a hybrid notional compound handling the artistic function of a symbol as well as the theoretical one of paradox, which amplifies an initially indifferent reciprocity expecting an emotional elicited, consented, guaranteed effect. Here, the interpretation treads on a favourable ground, the ground of rational schematism that has been verified for a long time

and which can offer solutions to understanding validated by an experience exceeding a relativising hermeneutic wimp (which would leave up each beholder an already settled out option). Hence, an actualisation of potentialities, contained in the eidetic concept, is obtained, speculating the field left free by the divine intelligence (or by the nature of the universal reasoning apriorisms) in favour of a conceptual derivative which surprisingly succeeds in rendering potential to the categorial effect of the paradigmatic notions by objectifying individualising, and particularising. Making the exemplary reason in the area of the ideal in a work with concrete features a central theme keeps all the essential attributes of the represented object, to the extent which “the thing does not have its own nature as long as it does not have its form and appearance”<sup>7</sup>. The more so, the form underlines the definition and confers it an axiological rank, while changing its existential register.

A second self-evident example is that of the suggestion of movement, the so-called “poses of movement,” present both in painting and in sculpture. This artistic effect contains a paradoxical intrinsic mark as well if it represents in a static form certain postures with dynamic intentionality, or as long as it can project temporal perspectives (a before or an ahead) on the instantiation exposed, choosing the richest and the more relevant present moment and profiting from the special virtue of the visual symbol to “concentrate” events with more ample happening in a single image. He finds the most suitable way to evoke expressively the general concept, which gathers the elements of the event and encloses, within the limits of the form, a whole world of significances, a sectorial destiny, a story. As “painting succeeds in presenting the human, soul, and inner element”<sup>8</sup>, the theme of a human nature is represented by a diversity of combinations of suggestive elements which convey the impression of movement, connecting together “adding-up” concepts and offering a quasi-epic perspective on the realities rendered. Hence, the dynamic concept resulted may suggest up-lifting feelings (if the story evokes historical dramas), may create an effect of compassion (if the image presents a scene related to the themes of suffering, for instance) or it may even inspire fear (where the dynamic effect or the characters’ “life” lowers the scales toward the aspect of tragic tension). The extraordinarily wide emotional palette which can “enter” the painter’s or sculptor’s repertoire helps the hermeneutic spirit to identify the most appropriate elaborate concept, the only one from whose perspective all features present in the work can be grasped (with their meaning-related implications as

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<sup>7</sup> Aristotel, *Metafizica* (Metaphysics), Iri Publishing House, 1999, p. 174.

<sup>8</sup> Nicolai Hartmann, *Estetica* (Aesthetics), Univers Publishing House, 1974, p. 212.



well). It is also an appropriate reaction to the form embodying this concept and supports its axiological side, which speculates the virtues of proportions and harmony in the form in order to translate them in the language of a spirituality of attitudes, of liaising to the absolute. Here the segment of events assumes the temporariness and integrates itself by means of the conceptual definition in a higher condition of eternity, in the vast super ordinate “landscape” which is the global image of the world (and which includes the particular fact similarly to the elaborate concept entering the significance relationships with the entire corpus of interpretation). Here, one can probably see best the long range of the conceptual transfiguration, its re-spiritualised stake, the overtly reunifying intention of the creative endeavour, which claims to be an alternative way of accessing the world of essences, a noble option by means of which any particular snapshot of life finds the liberating solution. Therefore, even when the artist fixes the ephemeral, he bears in mind a more profound meaning, leaving the interpretation of the fragment open to toward general features, toward a holistic vision. The road from the paradigmatic to the concrete-universal winds through form and act artistic synthesis.

Finally, the third self-evident example is mostly to be found in painting, the effect of three-dimensional spatiality, namely the play of planes of appearance and the harmony of lights with shadows. This is the place of each creator’s mastery, of the trial of his artistic intention, to the extent where he is able to offer an impressive perspective on a landscape or a portrait, revealing foreground and background features, highlighting expressions of the face with their emotional correspondences, suggesting inner or spiritual states. The special way in which he renders an initially neutral reality reveals here – probably better than anywhere else – the force of conceptual transfiguration of art, rooted in the possibility to outdistance, by stressing some elements which would become the nucleus of the perspective, of the formal or initially conceptual given, under the circumstances where each artist becomes an *interpreter* of reality, where he opts out for one manner of representation on another. With landscape, “the painting of light, the painting of atmosphere, the rendering of distance in space by successive planes, all these depend on the discovery of a way of seeing”<sup>9</sup>, meaning we assume one vision of presentation of the harmonious ensemble of elements of the picture. With the portrait, as we find out from the example of the great artists’ self-representations, the freedom of choice of the rendering manner expresses different conceptions of the same object turned into a theme, revising the artistic endeavour

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<sup>9</sup> Nicolai Hartmann, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

each time from a different angle, by means of ever-different tendencies of accentuation. An elaborate concept is thus obtained, whose definition reveals directly the aim the creator pursued when he projected his work, it reveals the essential of the rendering intention and opens a bridge of access to the features of his artistic self that appears most saliently at the level of the defining option of style. Further, a painting school always represents a trend of thinking, a genuine kit of philosophical, conceptual attitudes where eternal themes as well as new trials find a suitable manner to access the beholder's soul and an original form of establishing itself (by delimiting from the manner proper to other artists or other trends). This assumed trend leaves a mark on the concept-result and always guides interpretation, meaning it delimits and details that open, by comparing and contrasting, the paradigmatic concept to other ideal realities, to which it could not have been linked. And the conceptual outdistancing encounters availability to novelty and the disinterested curiosity of the beholder for as long as the exigency of a novel perspective on the fact presented is an almost mandatory condition of any encounter with art and for as long as each contemplator looks forward to leaving the interaction with the work of art enriched with a new spiritual acquisition or at least impressed, "moved", sensitised. The conceptual metamorphosis gains thus a direct, pragmatic goal, closer to the momentous effect than to the integrative commandment in the field of essential relations. It is meant to generate mutations of vision, to dislocate inertias, to hasten the event of individual progress by direct suggestion, by discreet invitation to reconsider, to modify the self.

These three examples present the huge potential of spirituality hidden in the simple form, an up-lifting resource of significance that waits being unveiled by the blessed hand of the artist (guided by an inspired consciousness, connected to the conceptual hierarchies of the absolute). With the help of these three examples we can see how the creative personality responds to a call, which commits it to the depth of its constitution and exceeds it by means of the range of its effects, of their universal and forever surprising stake.

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The relationship between form and rationality came to life at the same time as philosophy. Heidegger points out that "what places itself within its limits, completing itself and staying that way, has form, *morphe*. The form, as the Greek construed it, draws its essence from self-placement-within-the-limits, self-placement which becomes thus salient"<sup>10</sup>. And the limit determines by its defining

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted by Herbert Read, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

function, by essence, quality – this one determining in its turn the distinctive and elective nucleus of the concept. By form, matter reaches the supreme step of spirituality to the extent that a participation descending to the principle is possible (“form is prior to matter [...] it has the feature of existence to a higher degree than matter”<sup>11</sup>), to the extent that the spiritual ascension is transcendently “regressive”, assuming a forward movement toward the fundamental, toward the universal reason which underlies in a categorical manner the real. In this “dematerialisation of the material and materialisation of the immaterial”<sup>12</sup> lies the decisive step which transforms the pragmatic instrument in a work of art and here, at the encounter with the spiritual, the form begins its conceptualising adventure, which makes possible the privileged access to *eidōs* – which is the aesthetic creative act. This act implies, on its subjective aspect, “choosing from among more alternatives, weighing their possibilities” and consequently “it is not [...] a spontaneous act, but a meditative and a rational one”<sup>13</sup>. On its objective aspect, though, rationality enters its full rights to the extent that it mediates a conceptual transfiguration, to the extent that one bears in mind the spiritual evolution, the spectacularly rational result (the one that is meant to surprise thinking as well not only the aesthetic appreciation, an ephemeral category of an enlightened emotionality).

Although eternal forms equally become ‘material’ for creative associations with an aesthetic significance and transcendental guide of such associations, for as long as the difference of the artistic step is not merely an appendix of rationality, we can support, in line with the Jungian spirit, the theoretical endeavour of constructive aesthetics, focused on the hermeneutics of the elaborate notion and different from a reductive aesthetics (reducing to something already known). Revealing would then be the spiritual teleology of the artistic result, its integration in more comprehensive categories of meanings, and not merely an interpretation of its constitutive elements, a “genetic” vision meant to reconstitute their creative welding and to point out the thread that connected and cemented the ensemble. This thread has a particular meaning which defines the individuality of each work of art and which self-inserts in the self of an overflowing rationality, reviving it with its contribution. It helps the constructive aesthetics to identify at the beginning a unity of the work and then, grasping similarities of the manner of conceptual transfiguration, to define the style of a creator.

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<sup>11</sup> Aristotel, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

<sup>12</sup> Herbert Read, *op.cit.*, p. 88.

<sup>13</sup> Tudor Vianu, *Estetica (Aesthetics)*, Pentru Literatură (For Literature) Publishing House, 1968, p. 279.

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