



Visionary Art

By Gregory Bart

Part I: An Introduction and Paleolithic Origins

Of all the labels, themes, and perspectives used to understand art, the term “visionary” points to the heart of the matter. To see greater, farther, deeper, clearer, and to manifest that sight in perceptible form: this is the pervading thread woven through art of all ages. The purposes of such extensions of vision are manifold - to communicate, to guide, to explore, to question, to heal - as vision is an essential resource for the diversity of human needs. Visionary art thus makes the bold claim to concern itself with the primary impetus of creative action: not as extending merely our physical sight, but our consciousness. This is a great claim to make, for every age and region has had its visionary creators exploring both the frontier and the center, the heights and depths of human experience.



"Phaeton" by Gustave Moreau – 1878. Archetypal symbols and luminous transformations abound in visionary art.

Thus, visionary art makes great claims to be addressing the highest aims of art. It explores fundamental forces in human creativity originating at the earliest awakenings of human consciousness. Where does creativity come from? Can art heal? Can art transform consciousness? Can art reveal spiritual worlds and forces? Can art help solve global issues? These questions are raised and powerfully addressed in visionary art. Because of its depth and scope, it is a challenge to encapsulate its nature and manifestations throughout history. Unlike historically-bound art movements such as Impressionism or Conceptual art, the temporal gates of visionary art open wide and invite us to contemplate human creativity within a cosmic framework and a wide spectrum of consciousness.

Visionary art presents us with luminous, energetic images of spiritual beings, other worlds, and modes of perception. Many images display seemingly intelligent non-human beings such as plants, aliens, angels, gods, and spirit guides. Time itself becomes

malleable in visionary art - does it depict a distant past, an eternal present, or a potential future? A hallmark emphasis of visionary art is a conscious and living quality to the substance of reality itself. Much of visionary art today looks at integrating multiple levels and symbolic languages into a harmonious and inspiring whole - where mystical and divine oneness can be expressed through an integrated diversity of perspectives, forms and light. These images challenge us to reflect on our bedrock concepts of reality and state of consciousness.

Visionary art offers a doorway or window into normally unseen worlds. Laurence Caruana, author of *Manifesto of Visionary Art*, calls this perception “seeing the unseen,” an extension of vision into normally invisible realms and layers of existence. The effect of this imagery can be transformative; it can dissolve rigidities in our ways of perceiving, thinking, and believing. As the theorist and philosopher Terence McKenna intimated, these visions carry the weight of profound historical implication. The claim to perceive invisible worlds raises many questions. Do invisible worlds really exist, and if so, how accurately can we portray them? What is their bearing on our “ordinary” world? Skeptics may insist on the nonexistence of such realms, whose phenomena are merely the subjective experience of psychological phenomena. Others may experience pressure on their religious beliefs. After all, many religious texts such as the Book of Revelation are all about visions. Are these artists, too, receiving messages from angels, demons, or God?



“Opening Seals V and VI Trumpets of the Apocalypse” by Albrecht Durer – 1498. Many religious texts such as the Book of Revelation describe visions that hold profound religious significance.

These unseen worlds, or “visionary realms”, have gone by many names throughout history. Shamanic traditions generally refer to them as “upper” and “lower” worlds. William Blake, the now famous English artist of the 18th to 19th centuries, wrote of the “divine imagination”. In the Tibetan tradition it is called the “sambhogakaya”. The Abrahamic traditions familiarly call it “heaven” or “paradise” and “hell”. In Sufism it has been called the *ālam al-mithāl*,² or world of subsistent images. Access to these other dimensions can be found in a variety of ways, as we shall see, and can vastly enrich and humble our notions of what reality actually is.

Though ultimately ineffable, the endeavor to describe visionary art and its imagery challenges us to refine our language and extend our understanding into fresh territory, fruitfully enriching our minds and hearts with a deeper experience of its magic. Ultimately, the paintings speak for themselves; but with some contextual understanding and support, we can perhaps more easily “enter through the image” (another insight of Caruana's) and encounter their power.

Through embracing the vast spectrum of human perception, visionary art can potentially facilitate an expansion or transformation of consciousness. This power can function in many ways. It can function for the artist through the creative act of artmaking itself, in which a vision is

externally manifest as an artwork. It can also function for the artist as a form of communication to share something valuable. It can function for us, as viewers, as a stimulus for a powerful experience.

In this article I intend to present an inspiring introduction to visionary art, as well as a general argument for a more preeminent position that visionary artists deserve in global culture today. It has been a central force in my own life as an artist, musician, and educator. I have been fortunate enough to participate directly in several Visionary Art Intensives with the renowned Alex and Allyson Grey, and to dialogue in person with artist and author Laurence Caruana. I have been creating visionary art for many years, reflecting on its relationship to spirituality, technology, religion, and the multitude of unique challenges of our time. Many themes central to the visionary imperative will be introduced here, including some of my own insights as to the most relevant themes that visionary art explores in relation to the global challenges we face today.

We will be looking explicitly at *images* of visionary art, primarily painting. While the term "visionary" does indeed imply a *visual* nature to our subject, I do not argue for a preeminent value of visual images over other arts such as dance, poetry, drama, music, or cinema. This limitation allows us to narrow our already vast scope and examine through images the essential qualities of visionary art, many of which can be inferred to all of the arts. As we proceed, let us also keep in mind that visionary art is often made and experienced in a multimedia context, as it has been since its paleolithic origins.

Compared to other art movements and ideas, relatively little has been published directly addressing visionary art. Prominent art-publishing platforms such as Taschen, Abrams, and Phaedon lack an overview survey of visionary art. This may in part be due to its universality; it may be due to its controversial associations with altered states of consciousness related to drugs; it also may be due to the sensitive spiritual concerns of its artists. Yet, there are a handful of brilliant publications, especially Alex Grey's *Mission of Art* and Laurence Caruana's *Manifesto of Visionary Art*. Many concise articles also introduce its themes such as Philip Rubinov-Jacobson's *A Little Known Brief History of Visionary Art* and Erik Davis's *Visionary Art: The Vanguard of Tradition*. Baltimore's Museum of Visionary Art also offers its own narratives often closely associated with Outsider Art. Here, I intend to honor the ideas put forth in the literature and extend my own insights on our subject.

The scope of visionary art is vast. It arose at the dawn of painting tens of thousands of years ago, as we will explore below. Every age, every cultural and historical period has had its preeminent visionary artists, whether acknowledged or not, who integrated the technologies, mythologies, and milieu of their time to express something of the greater scope of reality. In a forthcoming book, I intend to articulate more fully the many exciting connections to be explored. Let us begin here with a brief sketch of the core themes of visionary art.

Direct Experience

Visionary art is an exploration of the frontiers of consciousness through creative engagement. Spiritual and religious traditions throughout history have developed techniques for transforming, focusing, and expanding consciousness. Meditation, prayer, dreamwork, and yoga are well known examples that many practice today. These methodologies, generally speaking, allow us to direct states of consciousness, and as such to heal, to evolve, to see further. Visionary artists

have used these techniques and others to interface with the frontiers of consciousness and inspire their work.

The brilliant philosopher of the twentieth century Terence McKenna relentlessly articulated the value of psychedelics as the quintessential tool for the exploration of consciousness. As such, they have been an essential tool for many visionary artists. In the experiences of psychedelics, generally speaking, boundaries are transcended (such as those between the outer and inner world, self and other, past-present-future, etc.) and reality itself is often perceived to become dynamic and alive in unimaginable ways. The experiences found in psychedelic states have been powerful sources of inspiration for many visionary artists.

Only recently has the stigma associated with psychedelics that stymied scientific research and their spotlight in human culture for decades begun to dissolve. Research by Dr. Stanislov Grof, Dr. Rick Strassman, and Dr. Roland Griffiths (among a growing number of other scientists) in the past few decades has segued into expanded scientific understanding of their potentially radical benefits to health and wellness. The growing recognition and impact of psychedelics in the Western world continues to evolve in parallel with a potentially more visionary global culture and forms of art.

Alex Grey, an outstanding and relatively well-known visionary artist working today, has publicly articulated in many contexts the impact of LSD (and other psychedelics) on his visionary artwork. In his prescient book *Mission of Art*, he describes one experience:



"Universal Mind Lattice" by Alex Grey, 1981.
www.alexgrey.com Higher dimensional unifying forces in the universe and consciousness are often the subject of visionary art.

In 1976 my wife, Allyson, and I had an experience that changed our lives and our art. We sacramentally ingested a large dose of LSD and lay down. Eventually a heightened state of consciousness emerged in which I was no longer aware of physical reality or my body in any conventional sense. I felt and saw my interconnectedness with all beings and things in a vast and brilliant Universal Mind Lattice...this was the state beyond birth and death, beyond time, our true nature, which seemed more real than any physical surrounding and more real even than my physical body...[later] I was somewhat shocked to learn that she had experienced the exact same transpersonal dimension...This experience of the infinite net of spirit transformed our lives and gave us a subject that became the focus of our art and our mission.³

Grey would later go on to paint the Sacred Mirrors series, with images such as *Universal Mind Lattice* depicting this particular visionary experience and others. Many renowned visionary artists, including Ernst Fuchs, Laurence Caruana, Martina Hoffmann, Robert Venosa, and Amanda Sage have discussed the varying degrees of influence that psychedelics have played in their work.

Are these psychedelic or visionary realms real? Psychedelic researcher Dr. Rick M. Strassman, author of *DMT: The Spirit Molecule*, articulates the question of the "reality" of such experiences. Referring to his DMT subjects in particular, he says, "They felt the experiences were more

real than real. The importance of the feeling of 'more real than real' is we make our decisions based on what we believe is real."⁴ In parallel, McKenna offers a characteristically poignant and humorous remark: "At this point, the question "Is it real?" is in bad taste."⁵ Phenomena (ideas, feelings, perceptions, etc...) in these states can seem more dynamic, multidimensional, and perhaps miraculous, experienced with tremendous immediacy and substance, rich in content for the creation of art. Whether it is real or not is, to some degree, a moot point, because the experience itself has a revelatory, healing, or illuminating power that is self-evidently important and meaningful, regardless of whether it is "real." Is love real? Is a life calling real? These experiences are what shape our life and perhaps open us to a greater humility and conception of what reality actually may be. Furthermore, these experiences often stretch or transcend the capacities of language itself, and thus art becomes a powerful and primary conduit for their communication.

Nonetheless, it is generally a prime assertion of visionary artists that the visions depicted are in fact real. The reality perceived is of a higher order than what we generally experience in "ordinary" consciousness, and this higher order is fundamentally determining the phenomena of this "mundane" world at a primary, causal level. In his poignant and provocative essay, *Visionary Art: The Vanguard of Tradition*, Erik Davis describes this world of the imagination, or *mundus imaginalis*:

In the strict sense, it is a realm of the imagination, but a true imagination that has a claim on reality because it mediates between the sensual world and the higher abstract realms of angelic or cosmic intelligences. The mundus imaginalis is a place of encounter and transformation.⁶

Without question, the phenomena encountered in visionary realms have a profound, life-shaping impact on the artists working with them. Generally, these artists would agree with McKenna's belief "that this stuff is important for all of us, that we're in some kind of lower dimensional slice, and what you see in the psychedelic experience actually has historical implications..."⁷ The visions depicted have a bearing on our historical moment, messages of profound if not mysterious implications.

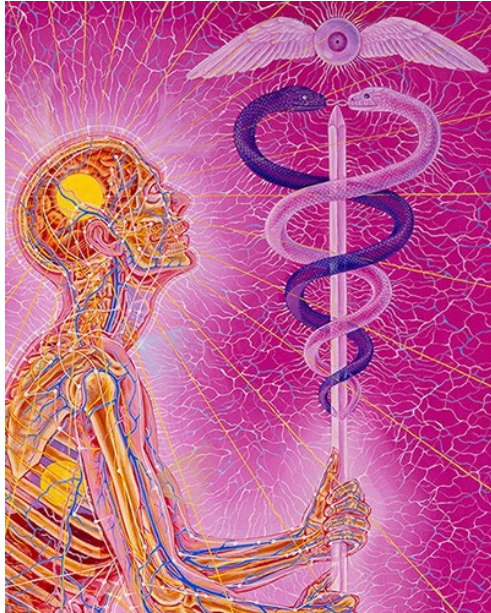
Though a powerful tool for many, psychedelics are not a necessary factor in visionary art for others. When asked if he did drugs, Salvador Dali famously exclaimed, "I don't do drugs, I am drugs!"⁸ This points to the fact that for many visionaries, visions and inspiration are accessible in a multitude of ways. Dali's imagery was so unexpected and bizarre that it seemed drug-like to many viewers. Looking further back, artists such as Hieronymus Bosch and Goya, whose wild inventions show tremendous visionary inspiration, likely never encountered psychedelics. Visionary artists may experience their art as a "calling," a necessity of life that they cannot live without. Hildegard von Bingen, for example, experienced spontaneous visions of God, and was challenged to orient her life accordingly. On the other hand, some visionary artists seek out their imagery intentionally by using meditation, lucid dreaming, psychedelics, or other practices as reliable tools. Present day artist Martina Hoffmann, for example, describes doing "journey work" on ayahuasca to facilitate personal and artistic evolution.⁹

Shamanism

Altered states of consciousness have been the domain of shamans par excellence for millennia. The renowned twentieth century anthropologist Mircea Eliade described shamanism as "archaic techniques of ecstasy,"¹⁰ ecstasy being a trance or distinctively altered state from "ordinary" waking life. This ecstasy brings the shaman into contact with spiritual resources (guidance,

allies, or information, for example) to benefit themselves and their community. Shamanic themes proliferate in visionary art, some of which we can list here:

- shape-shifting transformations from one state of being to another (human into animal, one animal into another)
- therianthropy (human-animal hybrids such as having a human body with antlers)
- a world tree or world mountain at the center of the cosmos, "axis mundi"



"Journey of the Wounded Healer" (detail) by Alex Grey – 1985. www.alexgrey.com Shamanic phenomena such as the "wounded healer" are consciously or unconsciously expressed in much visionary art.

creative life and his philosophically informed approach, Alex Grey's oeuvre presents an accessible gateway here. Works such as *Journey of the Wounded Healer* (1985) explicitly depict shamanic motifs and build a bridge between these traditional worldviews and modern scientific insights.

Let us focus on two of the most prominent shamanic themes in visionary art: those of shape-shifting and therianthropy.

Images of shape-shifting are commonly found in many paleolithic cave sites such as Lascaux, Chauvet, Gabillou, Trois-Frères, and many more, which we will soon see are some of the earliest examples of visionary art. Easily found in historical epochs, many religious and cultural traditions display this tendency to combine animals, such as in winged angels throughout the Christian tradition; Yamantaka (human body, bull-head) in Tibetan thangkas; centaurs, mermaids, and the minotaur in Greek mythology; the monkey hero-god Wukong of Chinese fairy tale; and countless other examples. Even a cursory glance at more modern visionary artists such as Goya, William Blake, Ernst Fuchs, Martina

- shaman as wounded healer
- replacement of internal organs with magical materials
- the three cosmic zones: the upper world (heavens), middle world (earthly plane), and lower world (infernal realms)
- magical flight, or the freedom to move between these zones or realms
- sacred plants and spirit animals
- magical door with a brief and treacherous moment of opening
- a magical cause of sickness (malevolent darts, kidnapped soul) and healing
- a shamanic calling through a period of sickness and trial
- shaman as psychopomp: escort of souls to an afterlife
- a bridge and a difficult passage
- mastery over fire and heat

Visionary art commonly depicts many or all of these themes. Through both the intensity of his



"Sorcerer of Trois Frères", Appr. 13,000 BCE. Depictions of human-animal hybrids, or "therianthropes", permeates the art of many cultures dating back to paleolithic cave paintings.

Hoffman, Alex Grey and a generation of younger artists reveals how transformation and shape-shifting are central foci of much visionary imagery.

The question of *why* shape-shifting and hybrids are so central to visionary art is fertile ground for insight, though beyond the scope of this article. We can mention in passing that it is indicative of the fluid, shape-shifting nature of reality itself perceived in visionary states, where the dynamics of the imagination are perhaps more real than the mundane sense of fixed solidity that we tend to normally experience.

Let us take a look at one well-known individual of the twentieth century who was both a visionary artist and a shaman. **Pablo Amaringo** (1938/1943-2009) spent his life in the Peruvian Amazon, much of it living in obscure poverty resistantly following a shamanic calling and then later in life selling paintings. Eventually he was discovered by anthropologist Eduardo Luis Luna



"Unicornio Dorado" by Pablo Amaringo – Date unknown. The iridescent colors and beings of Amaringo's work seem to reveal other worlds of luminous power, emanating from his experiences of ayahuasca and his shamanic calling.

and was encouraged to pursue his painting, made available for sale to Western audiences with Luna's assistance. When Luna asked Amaringo how he had learned to paint, "he said that during visions under the influence of *ayahuasca* he had been shown how to combine colors correctly to create the most beautiful nuances."¹¹ In Amaringo's work, we are immersed in realms of *ayahuasca*. Snakes, jaguars, alligators, and other Amazonian creatures morph and flow into humanoid beings. Though most of his paintings were made after he gave up

practicing shamanism and ingesting *ayahuasca*, they continued to be inspired by these earlier psychedelic experiences. In fact, "Pablo believes that he acquired his ability to visualize so clearly and his knowledge about colors partly from the *ayahuasca* brew".¹²

The relationship between shamanism, altered states, and visionary art is intimate and offers a reservoir of insights into the fundamental nature of creativity, communication, and human consciousness.

Paleolithic Art

Visionary art connects to shamanism and draws us back to the earliest origins of human creativity. This takes us to a period anthropologists call the "Middle to Upper Paleolithic

Transition”.¹³ The oldest known paintings made by humans appear at this threshold about 35 to 40 thousand years ago on cave walls scattered mostly throughout Western Europe. In this milieu there seems to have been a “creative explosion” evolving rapidly in concert with developments in archaic technology, communication, and culture. The paintings known as “parietal art” (as opposed to, for example, sculpted art) depict mostly megafauna living in the region during that period. Alongside depictions of now-extinct species of bison, horses, lions, bears, and deer can be found stranger imagery showing combinations of animals, or human-animal hybrids known as therianthropes.



Paintings of Chauvet Cave (southern France) – appr. 35-40,000 years ago. These earliest of known paintings are believed by leading anthropologists to have been created in shamanic contexts involving altered states of consciousness.

Most anthropologists agree that there was a shamanic element determinate in these cave paintings. In part this is due to the other-worldly quality of the subterranean environment. Caves such as the famous Chauvet, one of the earliest dated to the Aurignacian culture, are painted not at the more easily accessible cave entrance but deep inside where access is difficult, and daylight is far out of reach. The complete darkness, deep silence, limited oxygen, otherworldly concretions of minerals, and acoustics all likely combined to catalyze or intensify altered states of consciousness. In his brilliantly exciting book *Visionary* (previously published as *Supernatural*), Graham Hancock explores the likelihood of the shamanic and ecstatic impetus behind humanity’s earliest images left to us in these haunting chambers.

We can trace the lineage of visionary art all the way back to these earliest of paintings. Specific “earliest” dates and places are shifting continually with new discoveries. Yet renowned anthropologists in the field such as David Lewis-Williams, Jean Clottes, and others convincingly argue for the intimacy between shamanism, altered states, and the earliest paintings. They emerge in a context where a variety of states of consciousness were a defining factor, and it is this relationship that has unlocked the visionary creative impulse throughout history.

As we have seen, therianthropy and altered states were present in the oldest known eras of painting. These features and many others in our list above continue through visionary art today. In light of this, it becomes clear that visionary art is not correctly viewed as one school among many approaches to art; it is in fact of central importance to human consciousness within the evolving matrix of life on this planet. If it was intimate with the origins of the human creative capacity itself (in resonance with the formation of culture, technology, and perhaps language) and helped us excel through evolutionary bottlenecks such as the ice ages, perhaps it remains as a central force within our species to harmonize with nature and help us to navigate the pressing global challenges of our time.

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Opening banner: “Angel of Creation” (detail) by Gregory Bart.