

The following is the "Foreword," written by Keith Critchlow, to
Art from the Sacred to the Profane, by Frithjof Schuon. © 2007 World Wisdom, Inc.



1. Detail from a frontispiece of a Koran written and illuminated for Arghun Shah al-Ashrafi, Cairo, 14th century

Foreword

This book will delight, intrigue, and nourish the soul of the fortunate reader. Frithjof Schuon, on the basis of the fact that man is himself “made in the image of God,” proceeds to unfold the three-fold blessings of what it means to be human: “We can think, speak, and produce works of art,” and these unique qualities enable us to “contemplate and realize the Infinite.”

The author is, without doubt, one of the most penetrating philosophical minds of the twentieth century, if not well beyond. His references take us up through the hierarchies of the earthly states to the angelic sources of inspiration.

Frithjof Schuon immediately introduces us to an objective view of the arts, and leaves opinion behind, reminding us of a story told about Plato. One of Plato’s students, it is said, asked him towards the end of his life, “What is it that you have attempted to achieve in your life’s work?” and Plato replied, after due consideration, “to have raised human debate above the level of opinion.” There is no doubt in this writer’s mind that Schuon has offered us a similar ideal in the words contained in this book.

Universality in the arts cannot be removed from the universality of being human. However, even this last value and the questioning of its deepest meaning are woefully neglected by the majority of authors in our time. The fact that, unique amongst God’s creatures, we can “think, speak, and produce works of art,” with all the breadth and depth that these words imply, means that we have access to Eternity at any moment. It could even be said that it is the very universality of these arts that lies beyond passing time and is itself in the transcendent domain of Eternity.

When reason and faith have achieved a marriage in the story of mankind, great works have been achieved. It is within this marriage that logical reasoning is transcended by *in-sight*, *in-tuition*, and *in-spiration*. Each of these words, by their very etymology, *re-cognize* the inner nature of direct cognition or *in-tellection*.

Art is “doing”—that is, manifesting the outpourings of insight, intuition, and inspiration. Tradition in the arts is its bulwark and protection against a deterioration into personal contention, opinion, and hedonism.

This beautiful book, whose words and images have been so lovingly and discriminatingly assembled by Catherine Schuon, has the broadest coverage of any of the books on art that this writer has seen in forty years of teaching art and architecture. It should become *the* fundamental reference book for all comprehensive teaching of the visual arts, anywhere in the world. However, it will not always read comfortably with those who hold their particular historical views and ideas about the “Primitive” rather than “Primary” or “Primordial.” It is, rather, for the serious reader, the contemplative reader, as well as the reader who delights in the love of “Beauty Itself.”

Frithjof Schuon allows us an immediacy of vision of the central purpose of the arts: at best, they place us in the presence of timeless Being, that Being which sustains and gives reality to our source and our destiny.

KEITH CRITCHLOW
Professor Emeritus
The Prince’s School of Traditional Arts