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Spiritual Moderns: Twentieth-Century American Artists and Religion

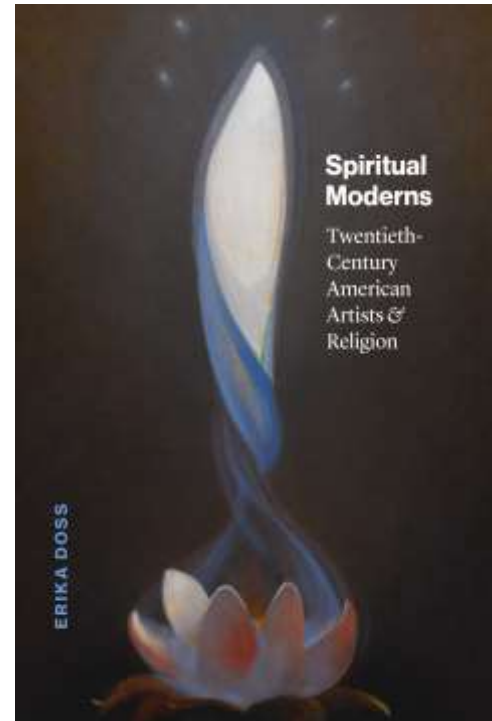
By Erika Doss

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In her new book *Spiritual Moderns*, Erika Doss presents a convincing challenge to the prevailing omission of religion in the story of twentieth-century modernist art in the United States. The introductory chapter contrasts the spiritualism of Wassily Kandinsky and the formalism of Clement Greenberg, whose essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939) launched his reductive version of modernism. Following a European avant-garde “art for art’s sake” approach, he located the value of art wholly in its form. Greenberg understood art as progress toward nonobjective abstraction, its forms not bound by reference to the real world but full of the energy characterizing the United States after World War II. He found a paradigm of this advance in the nonobjective, energetic, even “volcanic” art of Jackson Pollock, which seemed to reflect the country’s postwar supremacy (128).

Kandinsky and Greenberg agreed that modern art faced a crisis: Kandinsky pointed to the “nightmare of materialism,” to which a nonobjective modern art enlightened by personal spiritual experience was an answer; Greenberg, on the other hand, demanded, as he put it in 1949, an art “uninflated” by “illegitimate content—no religion or mysticism or political uncertainties” (21, 31). When the history of US art was written in the postwar years, Greenberg’s understanding of modernist art prevailed. As Rosalind Krauss noted in 1979, “now we find it indescribably embarrassing to mention *art* and *spirit* in the same sentence” (6). Or as T. J. Clark stated in 2001, “modernism turns on the impossibility of transcendence” (6). In *Spiritual Moderns*, Doss corrects this denial of the presence of spirituality in twentieth-century US art and restores its important role in both its making and understanding.



While Doss earned her PhD in art history, she was, from 2007 to 2022, a professor of American Studies at Notre Dame. Tracing the relationship between religious belief and US modernism, she draws on a wide range of scholarship in different fields, such as sociology, affect theory, and the history of religion, which ground her archival work. In *Spiritual Moderns*, Doss limits the project to artists who were religious or spiritual in that they believed in a transcendent reality, excluding those whose work served a particular religion, such as Warner Sallman, who painted the widely reproduced *Head of Christ* (1940).

Doss presents four case studies of spiritual moderns: Joseph Cornell, Mark Tobey, Agnes Pelton, and Andy Warhol. In each case, she starts with one artwork by the artist, addressing its form and content as well as its religious dimension, adding new insight to the chosen piece. She next presents a history of the religion to which the artist adhered, followed by the artist's relationship with a major art movement, namely Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, Transcendental Painting, or Pop Art. She then turns to the way faith is manifest in the works and finally to the failure of criticism at the time to recognize this important aspect of the art. Her goal is to show that once religion or spirituality is admitted into the history of the art, our understanding of the art is enriched, and art history is rendered more complete.

The first case study is the collage art of Cornell, exemplified by his *Soap Bubble Set* (1939). In a box fronted with clear glass, Cornell places images cut out from old engravings of objects of scientific interest. While these pictures evoke scientific objectivity, they are simultaneously presented as easily burst soap bubbles, emanating from a pipe, thus calling into question our scientifically "objective" interpretations of the physical world. Pointing to the ephemerality of our understanding of matter, Cornell's collage work visually indexes his spiritual beliefs. In 1926, five years before he started making art, Cornell joined the Church of Christ, Science. Founded in Boston in 1879 by Mary Baker Eddy, Christian Science is opposed to scientific materialism and trusts in the divine principle of mental healing. Religious practice consists of identifying and correcting the errors of matter to reach spiritual consciousness or "unfoldment," described by Eddy as "boundless bliss," an affective state that Cornell, as he states in his diaries and personal notes, sought to reveal in his art (43). His collaged imagery was shown in the Julien Levy Gallery, a significant space for the display of Surrealist art in New York in the 1930s and 1940s. Surrealism, to which Cornell was first introduced via the Levy Gallery, sought an "absolute reality, a surreality," tapping into dreams, memories, and visions to liberate the mind (54). Cornell's goal became, as he puts it, "to make a 'healthier' kind of Surrealism," an art not of "black" but of "white magic," of spiritual revelation (57–58). While his boxes sold well over his long career, he worried that commerce hid the spirituality of his art, once telling a gallerist, "You don't know how terrible it is to be locked into boxes all your life" (77).

In her study of Tobey, Doss confronts Greenberg head on. In 1944, the critic called Tobey's "white writings," small canvases of delicate allover calligraphic marks, "one of the few original contributions to contemporary American painting" (87). But by 1945, after seeing Pollock's "smoky, turbulent painting," Greenberg declared Pollock "the strongest painter of his generation" (88). His subsequent antipathy to Tobey's art most likely derived from suspicions that the art was guided by what he considered irrelevant and distracting concerns, from metaphysics to "Orientalism" (88). Tobey had indeed become a member of Baha'i in 1918 and remained so for almost sixty years. Founded in mid-nineteenth-

century Iran, Baha'i is a monotheistic religion focused on spiritual and global unity. Tobey's development of an all-over style of abstract art was motivated by Baha'i interests in a new world order of universal humanity. His innovative "white writing" can be traced to Baha'i's founders, who were known to have produced nonobjective energetic fields of calligraphic marks, as well as to Japanese calligraphy. Tobey, who might have attained the status of a canonical Abstract Expressionist, was instead relegated to the role of a minor artist when Greenberg pushed Pollock to the fore as the ideal all-American artist of outsized secular and masculine energies.¹

Detailed biography plays a role in all four case studies; Doss's account of Pelton's, though, is especially racy. Pelton's visionary modernism is rooted in one of the most infamous sex scandals of the Gilded Age, when her grandfather Theodore Tilton sued Henry Ward Beecher, a celebrity evangelist of his time, for "criminal intimacy" with Pelton's grandmother (141). This scandal overshadowed Pelton's childhood, leading to a nervous breakdown when she was nineteen. Pelton never became a member of an organized faith. Her spirituality was private, finding expression in her art. She began painting wan females in misty landscapes around 1911 but became convinced by 1917 that Cubism could best convey her mystical experiences. Pelton's abstractions were fed by her encounters with a panoply of belief systems and practices: New Thought, Theosophy, astrology, and Agni Yoga, which pop-culture scholar Christopher Partridge helpfully names "occulture" (140). Especially important to Pelton was Theosophy, which promoted spiritual evolution toward a Higher Self, through which one could gain contact with a Universal Divine Principle, the root of ALL. Madame Blavatsky, who cofounded the Theosophical Society in 1875, designed this new faith as a progressive substitute for mainstream religion. Pelton's *Divinity Lotus* (1929), which graces the cover of *Spiritual Moderns*, refers in a somewhat abstract way to a lotus flower, which Blavatsky called "a most occult plant" and is the universal symbol of spiritual enlightenment (166). Above are a flame and an aureole of stars, emblems New Age practitioners of today might recognize as expressions of self-realization and yogic practice. Pelton increasingly practiced yogic rituals in the quiet of Cathedral City in southern California, disturbed only by the necessity of making money, which she accomplished by painting desert landscapes for tourists. Recognized in her younger days as a participant at the Armory Show of 1913 and a member of the Transcendental Painting Group in the 1930s, Pelton died largely unknown, having created remarkable and affective visualizations of her meditative and spiritual states that today are sought after by museums and collectors.

Warhol, the subject of the fourth case study, would seem to embody the materialism and commercialism of post-World War II society in the United States. The integration of his Pop Art into the canon of art history has been largely understood as a breaking down of barriers between high and low culture. But Doss's attention to Warhol's lifelong devotion to Byzantine Catholicism opens up an important new dimension in our understanding of his art. When Warhol decided to transition from his highly successful career as a commercial artist to the world of high art, he brought with him both commercial imagery and his belief in God's incarnation throughout material creation. The rich imagery and rituals of the Byzantine Catholic church he attended in his youth, Saint John Chrysostom in Pittsburgh, with its great iconostasis screen covered with golden icons through which one gained access to the holy, had an impact on the way in which Warhol transposed the commercial imagery of the United States into Pop Art. His early paintings of Campbell

soup cans are frontal, flattened, and repetitive; his silkscreened head of Marilyn Monroe appears like an icon against a gold ground; and his variations on Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* number around one hundred. Into these variations, Warhol introduced signs of the United States's commercial culture, such as sketches of motorcycles, bodybuilders, and price tags. One canvas features the phrase "The Big C," a reference to "gay cancer," as AIDS was called in the early 1980s. In referencing the AIDS epidemic, Warhol, who was openly gay, questioned the Church's continuing dogmatic prohibitions against homosexuality, heralding a culture war between the Catholic Church and an increasingly open society.

Doss discusses this culture war in her concluding chapter, as amplified in the 1990s in the artwork of Robert Gober and others. This is the decade in which the author began her own explorations of spiritual moderns, while participating in a multiyear, interdisciplinary, collaborative project, "The Visual Culture of American Religions," organized by Sally Promey and David Morgan.² In her essay "The 'Return' of Religion in the Scholarship of American Art," written for *The Art Bulletin* in 2003, Promey assures the reader that Doss would critique the erasure of religion from the modernist canon and the process of its construction, a promise now fulfilled.³ Doss remarks in her conclusion that more US artists are waiting to be (re)discovered as spiritual moderns. The bibliography with fourteen entries given in her penultimate footnote attests to the growing recognition of the spiritual in modern US art, a development in the fields of art history and American Studies in which Doss's *Spiritual Moderns* will stand as an exemplary model.

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Notes

¹ Pollock's secular identity in Greenberg's modernism has been recently rebutted in my article "Self-Betrayal or Self-Deception? The Case of Jackson Pollock," *Arts* 12, no. 2 (March 2023), <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts12020054>.

² Erika Doss, "Robert Gober's 'Virgin' Installation: Issues of Spirituality in Contemporary American Art," in *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, ed. David Morgan and Sally S. Promey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 129–45, 322–24.

³ Sally Promey, "The 'Return' of Religion in the Scholarship of American Art," *Art Bulletin* 85, no. 3 (September 2003): 589, 601n56.