

(At the end of the text are listed a series of links to the pertinent parts of the website.)

Artist's Statement for the Nicholas Roerich Museum Exhibition, "Mandalas and Related Works", April 1989, by Allen Schill

– I am very grateful to the Nicholas Roerich Museum, and to its Director, Mr. Daniel Entin, for the opportunity to show the work that has been closest to my heart over the years. Due to the special congruence of the Museum's unique interests and mine, I am very glad to have been offered such an ideal forum for the exhibition of my work, and honored.

– From my earliest years I remember being fascinated with the natural world, and I remember speculating about such things as God, Time, and the Universe. While these may be childish ways, I never gave them up as I became a man. Life seemed a mixture of very engaging things and apparently necessary evils. I found the subjects of study at school often highly interesting, but the institution of school and the society of students (like the society at large) often bizarre and perplexing.

– As I got a little older I was interested in almost everything, it seemed: history, politics, science, art, and philosophy. Sometime during my college years it all crystallized into a resolve to be an artist. My own studies and special interests, as well as events in the world at large, led me to this overwhelming inspiration, which I experienced in a thoroughly typical way as a calling. I didn't know immediately just what I wanted to do, but very soon it began to come into focus.

– My diverse interests in the natural world, philosophy, and religion became aligned with my growing understanding about the function of art and what I could easily imagine myself making. Believing art's fundamental purpose in our lives is spiritual, I wanted to create work that could convey the message of a universalistic spirituality that I found manifest in life and natural phenomena at every level of existence. The only thing to do, it seemed, and still seems, was and is to carry the flame of this ideal, and to hope we will benefit as much as possible. I knew I could do this, practically speaking, by using the forms, processes, and dynamics of the physical universe, as an inexhaustible source of inspiration.

– Within this evolving frame of reference, my studies of the history of art found an ample number of exemplars, inspirations, and kindred spirits, whose work lent enormous support, I felt, to my convictions about art's essentially spiritual function. They include the religious artists of the Renaissance like Sassetta, Michelangelo, Leonardo, the Van Eyck brothers, Bosch, and Dürer, the traditions of manuscript illumination and miniature painting in Persia, India, and Europe, and of course the ritual art and landscape painting of Asia. They include Arabic geometrical design and the flowing, organic forms of Antonio Gaudi, the extraordinary architect of Barcelona, the design work of William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement, and the many artists inspired by nature in the practices of embellishment. Furthermore, they include the heightened expressionism of Van Gogh and the kindred landscapes of Charles Burchfield, the

heavy mysticism of the Pre-Raphaelites, the surrealism of Max Ernst and Joseph Cornell, the transcendentalism of Mark Tobey and Jackson Pollock, and the visionary art of Ivan Albright, Pavel Tchelitchew, Allen Atwell, and Ernst Fuchs. Last but not least they include tribal art and the art of ancient civilizations, along with the myths and beliefs that inform them.

– The common thread uniting all these, was, for me, the richness of spiritual energy that clearly went into their creation, regardless of the particular beliefs and circumstance that served as context, and regardless of the forms in which they were manifested. Some artists employed symbolism, some created formal dynamism, some used intensely precise and subtle rendering of detail, and some have tried to undermine our conventional frameworks of perception. In every case, however, the artist had a powerful vision which he projected into the work, which in turn is projected into us.

– Like that of many a nascent artist, my earliest work was often embarrassingly clumsy and derivative. My figure drawings and still lifes were crudely drawn even when accurately seen and rendered. My figure paintings rendered flesh either lurid or pasty, with awkwardly painted backgrounds and elaborately modeled draperies. Certain drawings and paintings displayed a Van Gogh-like obsession with contour and vibrant colors. A pastel drawing of several simple shapes dancing together on a field of light was an obvious nod to Paul Klee. A welded-metal sculpture depicted a female figure in a way suggestive of Futurism or Cubism. A sculpture of multicolored plexiglass rectangles, glued together into a tabletop-sized thing, looks like a model of a design by Le Corbusier. All the same, there are isolated examples which are presentable or even good.

– My work began to move in a direction more uniquely my own when I realized I could use the forms of nature to express the essence. For a long time, the diagrams, illustrations, and visual records of science impressed me at least as much for their philosophical implications as for their pure informational value. Tremendous progress has been made in all the realms of scientific investigation; I could not help but see spiritual meanings in the revelations of evolution, astronomy, cosmology, particle physics, and genetics. It seemed very important somehow to integrate science with religion. Capra's celebrated book, *The Tao of Physics*, accomplished this brilliantly. I wanted to do the same kind of thing with images instead of words.

– It began with patterns and textures from nature. As a photographer I had been involved with this subject since my adolescence. To me they were visible manifestations of ongoing processes. I started to draw patterns, either abstracted from natural forms or simply imagined, with brightly-colored felt-tipped pens, usually on graph paper. Some were highly regular, repeating like a fabric design, using patterns that might suggest Arabic geometrical designs or early Greek decorative design. Others repeated only in one direction, like the highly stylized, schematic landscapes that were imagined as designs for ceremonial drums. Still

others used motifs inspired by visionary art, or by life forms and life processes.

– This work evolved rather quickly and inexorably into the mandala. A friend who had seen my work referred me to Jung’s book, *Man and His Symbols*, on the cover of which was depicted a Tibetan mandala. Although I probably hadn’t seen anything quite like it, I think I understood intuitively what it was all about. It seemed already to be my immediate direction. I was already interested in the religious traditions of Asia, and these elaborate yet simple images struck me as perfect summations, in visual form, of these teachings. As such, the mandala was the ideal vehicle for my expressive intentions. Gradually I learned more about the function of the mandala as a focus for meditation and prayer. It made perfect sense to me when I read that the word “mandala”, besides referring to the diagram, is Sanskrit for “perfectly endowed”.

– From an artist’s point of view, moreover, the mandala affords infinite possibilities for formal invention and for technical experimentation, despite the confinement one might expect to be imposed by the use of such a singular motif. In fact the mandala is no more confining to a visual artist than the sonata form is to a composer: the general outline is a given, but within this there are no limits to pure invention. I was glad to have found such a perfect and versatile motif with which to work while I investigated various technical possibilities in painting, drawing, printmaking, and photography.

– The first few mandala-like works were images of growing, radiating, stylized-organic forms, painted in bright acrylics, often straight out of the tube. Then there was a series of paintings, most of which were conceived specifically as mandalas, on primed linen or board, whose forms were more controlled and more elaborately detailed, and which showed much more concern with color harmony. Then I became extremely restrained with both color and form, almost eliminating detail, and working out very delicate progressions of a limited palette. At about the same time I started to get involved in graphics, particularly carved linoleum-block printing and zinc-plate etching. These had the same type of intricacy and form as the paintings, but after printing these blocks and plates in the usual manner (inking the block or plate and printing relief or intaglio as the case may be), I decided to subdue the design as much as possible, to go for a more subtle effect, making prints that would only reveal themselves on close inspection, prints that seemed to aspire almost to invisibility. This was done by relating the color of the ink to that of the paper as closely as possible, and by making inkless embossments, in which the design would only be shown by relief.

– My painting began to work with the use of a textured surface to introduce some element of surface relief, with the design incised more than painted. This shift in the direction of simplicity coexisted with a desire for even greater intricacy and subtlety, and for greater naturalism than was within my capacity or might be in time. I wanted detail as naturalistic as in a photograph, and I realized that photographic means could render the subtleties of the natural world more easily

and accurately than I could hope to do by hand. I made mandalas by assembling photographic prints of a given area of an image, printed to be mirror-images of one another. These assemblages were rephotographed to make large contact negatives and diapositives for use in processes like photosilkscreen, photoetching, hand processes in photographic printing such as Palladium and gum-bichromate printing, and conventional color and black-and-white printing.

– Most of the rest of my work has been photography, usually of a more conventional sort: still life, landscape, figure study, or interior. Some was more experimental in method or medium, like assemblages of borrowed or found images, or the panoramic assemblages. Most recently, I have been working with a view camera photographing still lifes I construct of all sorts of odd objects, detritus, and fragments. I want to work much further with constructions that may be part still life, part collage, and part sculpture.

Allen Schill

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Links to the most pertinent parts of the site:

Painting and Sculpture: <http://www.2you.it/levischill/slider.php?p=S6a>

Graphics-Printmaking: <http://www.2you.it/levischill/slider.php?p=S6b>

Drawing: <http://www.2you.it/levischill/slider.php?p=S6c>

Recent Photographic Mandalas: <http://www.2you.it/levischill/slider.php?p=S5c>

Mandalas in Palladium: <http://www.2you.it/levischill/slider.php?p=S5d>

Mandalas in Color: <http://www.2you.it/levischill/slider.php?p=S5e>