

# Apologist of the Imagination:

Howard McConeghey's *Art and Soul*



*an essay review*

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One of the great gifts of my career in the expressive arts therapies has been the opportunity to know Howard McConeghey and to work closely with him for over twenty years. Our collaboration began during the summer of 1984 when Howard invited me to teach as a guest professor in the art therapy graduate program he founded at the University of New Mexico. The program was committed to Archetypal Art Therapy, a discipline created by Howard and inspired by the writings of James Hillman.

McConeghey has been credited by Hillman as one of the key figures in developing archetypal psychology and as the person largely responsible for bringing Hillman back to the United States after thirty-two years of living in Europe, ten of which were spent as Director of Studies at the Jung Institute in Zurich. McConeghey invited Hillman to lecture in New Mexico, and shortly afterwards Hillman accepted a position at the University of Dallas, as archetypal psychology established roots in the American Southwest and quickly established a worldwide presence.

When I first spoke to Howard at an American Art Therapy Association Conference, he came up to me after a talk that I gave and described how good it was to hear someone in art therapy speaking about William Blake and the poet Charles Olson. He felt a kinship with this primary focus on imagination, a philosophical orientation that was not common in the early days of art and expressive arts therapy, and he invited me to visit Albuquerque.



—Howard McConeghey

Howard made me aware of the writings of James Hillman, which deepened my work in expressive arts therapy. He also revived my interest in C. G. Jung who I had read seriously as an undergraduate student. Even though the graduate programs that I started at Lesley University in the early 1970s slightly predated the New Mexico program, I adopted Howard as a mentor. He had spent a lifetime as a senior professor, scholar and artist, and as a WWII soldier he tracked down Picasso and was the first American to visit with him after the liberation of Paris in August of 1944. He spent three hours with Picasso in his studio at 7 rue des Grand Augustines and a year later, on VJ Day, visited with Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas in their apartment on the rue Christine. Since Howard had carefully read and experienced so many things that I respect-

ed, I attached myself to his erudition like a magnet, eager to learn.

In addition to our mutual admiration of Blake and the psychology of imagination, Howard and I shared a commitment to the work of Rudolf Arnheim with whom I had studied during the early 1970s. As someone who came to art therapy and archetypal psychology from a personal background in art and art education, Howard has always been keenly attuned to the integration of depth psychology with the tangible presence and structural features of artworks.

I absorbed Howard McConeghey's thought largely through conversation, since he had not focused on publishing his ideas in a comprehensive manner. Painting had been the prima-

ry source of his expression throughout his career as a professor. In addition to founding and directing the University of New Mexico graduate program, he focused his creative energy on the making of a sanctum of psyche in the home and studio in Albuquerque that he shared with his wife Evelyn. The house, gardens, studio spaces, and art hanging everywhere formed an environment, a composite of a domestic museum and temple that has been one of Howard's primary creations.

After Howard retired from the University of New Mexico, I urged him to write more about his work. He contributed an article to a special issue of *The Arts in Psychotherapy* that I edited in 1994 on the legacy of Rudolf Arnheim. His essay "Arnheim and Art Therapy" focused on the reading of images and how the therapeutic impact of art in therapy was connected to aesthetic qualities. The paper linked Arnheim with Hillman by demonstrating how images "speak" to us through formal patterns that McConeghey described as "hidden." We can, however, become aware of these communications when we look more carefully at visual phenomena and understand how the surface structures of pictures often have more of an effect on expression than their subject matter.

### **Love of *Poiesis***

Just as it was meaningful for me to meet another art therapist whose formative influences included Rudolf Arnheim, William Blake, Charles Olson, and C. G. Jung, it may be significant for the readers of this journal to

discover and study a major contributor to expressive arts therapy who lovingly and knowledgeably embraces *poiesis* and "bringing forth" psyche's images as the essence of his life work.

After many years of careful labour, Howard McConeghey has published the book that many of us have been eagerly awaiting. *Art and Soul* (2003) is a must-read text for all expressive arts therapy graduate programs committed to underpinnings in depth psychology. It is a concise, hundred-page manuscript written over many years, published by Spring Publications with the support of James Hillman, and begins with a foreword by Thomas Moore.

As someone who is familiar with McConeghey's work and the artistic/theoretical landscape in which it has been honed, I find it remarkable how he is able to evoke the total spectrum of his influences in such a terse yet expansive format that truly flows from page to page. The loftiest of ideas are thoroughly grounded in specific examples that demonstrate how to link particular experiences to archetypal concepts. *Art and Soul* is a master's masterpiece that efficiently consolidates a lifetime of scholarship into a succinct format, extracting the marrow of complex and far-reaching thoughts into one clear, passionate, and elegant text.

McConeghey offers an insight into how he was able to write such an efficient yet spacious book when he describes the artistic method of "circularity," which involves a process of con-

tinuously returning to an image. When commenting on the work of Henry Schaeffer-Simmern, McConeghey gives us a window into his own way of working: "...it is through circular reiteration that the image gains richness and body in the conscious world and finally achieves its essential form. This is how image feeds psyche" (p. 13).

I realized when reading about the circular method—looking "carefully again and again [...] to see if they could improve upon it, each time getting closer to getting it just right" (p. 13)—how I observed Howard working this way on a single small painting that he made over the two weeks of my class at the University of New Mexico. Where other people in the group made a series of paintings, Howard stayed with one image, a design of intertwining circles, returning to it each day with a persistence that intrigued me.

*Art and Soul* helps me see how this method of circularity is the key to understanding the essence of Howard McConeghey's life work and his commitment to the "circular reconnaissance of the psyche" which keeps returning us to its "archetypal roots" (p. 13) with a sense of wonder and new discovery. This same style of returning again and again to a composition characterizes his larger paintings on canvas (see illustrations).

In this circular configuration of soul work, we "put psyche at the centre" rather than ego. "The responsibility of the ego," McConeghey writes, "becomes that of stepping aside, off center, to allow psyche to speak" (p. 19). Rather than being led by the "rudders of the steering ego" (p. 60),



—Howard McConeghey

“the discipline of imagination” is “musical” and poetic (p. 44). It applies to the making of our lives as well as to artistic expressions. We commit ourselves to the unfolding of a potential that we sense but do not yet know.

In concise and carefully crafted statements, McConeghey presents the fundamental principles of expressive arts therapy practice as effectively as any writer in the history of our discipline; in doing so, he offers a new standard for precision. I view the book as a companion to Stephen K. Levine’s equally succinct *Poiesis: The Language of Psychology and the Speech of the Soul* (1992). Both texts are especially useful to students since they demonstrate in the most accessible way how today’s practical methods can be linked to rich intellectual traditions.

Howard McConeghey is a planter of seeds, concise and polished ideas that he has lodged in the consciousness of students who now work throughout the world. With his book *Art and Soul* he has created yet another bountiful kernel: a true amalgam of his life and one that carries the whole and illuminating DNA of his vision of archetypal art therapy.

**“We must maintain the tension.”**

For those of us accustomed to thinking of “images” as both visible (visual art objects, perceptions of the world) and invisible (dreams, memories, imaginings), McConeghey can create a certain tension that I have always viewed as a sign of good teaching and as a stimulus for new creation. *Art and Soul* offers

helpful, practical summaries of established methods of archetypal psychology described in Hillman’s “Inquiry into Image” essays (1977, 1978, 1979) and Patricia Berry’s “An Approach to a Dream” (1974), all of which build on Jung’s formative methods of active imagination (Chodorow, 1997). But in my opinion, the new and lasting contribution of this book to expressive arts therapy literature is its discussion of the visible and invisible interplay that characterizes the emergence of images. Since McConeghey is uniquely knowledgeable about the realm of sensory images in art and perception, he speaks with considerable authority when making his case for the priority of the invisible.

I have always approached the visible and invisible realms of image work as a subtle interaction between different and reciprocal realms. Comfortable in holding and accepting the paradoxical and simultaneous presence of visible and invisible things, I have never felt a need to see the invisible as deeper than what exists on the face of an expression. For me, physical forms express depths that we do not adequately see. So it can be jarring to read Howard’s insistence that: “Forms in themselves have no value. If seen only in their outer shape they are empty idols” (p. 28).

A closer reading of this passage suggests that the words “If seen only” hold the key to what is being said about form. Rather than negating form, McConeghey is making a more subtle suggestion: Look with imagination, not just with a literal eye—the double eye of imagination that sees what is there and not there. I am



—Howard McConeghey

fully committed to this way of looking but more reluctant to see the invisible as a priority.

When talking at another point in his text about the processes of affirming and judging expressions, McConeghey says that “we must maintain the tension” and do both. Perhaps this also applies to relationships between the physical image and its subtle body, between the sensing and imagining eyes.

Howard McConeghey’s ideas about images are connected to important traditions in the arts. He cites the poet Ezra Pound who believed that the image “presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” (p. 88). And his sense of the image is informed by the painters Cezanne and Van Gogh who attempted to express the inner radiance and essence of a landscape or object rather than its literal and external appearance. These antecedents place McConeghey’s thoughts into a larger context when he says: “The work of art presents the image to us. It is not itself the image” (p. 84). The image is the “luster” of the things we see and not the things themselves. The purpose of artistic design “is to reveal the invisible through the visible” (p. 29), to express the “numinous” that it embodies.

But for McConeghey the expression of the invisible image is not always enough, especially when it comes to healing. Art therapy and art education, in their efforts to serve others and the soul, complete the inner image by responding to its artistic embodiment, something that does not automatically happen “when the painting is painted or the poem written” (p. 10). Viewing the

response to the expression as the completion of the image returns us to the idea of circularity discussed above. These are important ideas for expressive arts therapy to ponder. They offer an intelligent and inspirational statement of vision for our community.

Ultimately, *Art and Soul* galvanizes my awareness of the invisible dimension of expressive arts therapy and makes me realize that it needs attention. The book furthers my appreciation of Howard McConeghey's position as a defender of the invisibles—"image is the invisible idea which hides itself behind reality" (p. 83). To fully appreciate this advocacy for the unseen, one must know how McConeghey loves the sensuous features of artistic expressions, how he has committed his life to refining his craft as a painter, and how the priority status he gives to the invisible image is thoroughly integrated into a discipline for "incarnating" it within sensory expressions.

McConeghey complements his theoretical reflections with clear, practical suggestions on how to see through the forms of expression to the formative image, how to realize the process of *poiesis* as a "bringing forth" of the image from our thoughts and hearts, and how to approach beauty as sensory perception and the act of seeing what is before us. We need to look and keep looking at artistic expressions with a sense of mystery and fullness, always avoiding pat explanations which defend against the numinous images and the opportunities for healing and making whole which they offer.

As I read *Art and Soul*, I saw how its visible form corresponds completely to Howard McConeghey's objective of giving "body to the essential reality" (p. 15). The ideas of the "invisible essence" and "subtle substance" advanced by archetypal psychology were evident in every aspect of the book as I caught fleeting glimpses of the angel that lives inside its face and form. *Art and Soul* is a tremendous success, written by a learned and convincing devotee of soul, who perfectly exemplifies how a person can "allow psyche to speak."

## References

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