Colour, Shape, and Music: The Presence of *Thought Forms* in Abstract Art

Zoe Alderton

Introduction

The impact of Theosophy on modern abstract art is substantial. Seminal contributors to the movement such as Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, and František Kupka were heavily influenced by Theosophical teachings. These ideas are apparent in their approach to colour and form and in their opinions on the social and spiritual role of the artist. Australian modernists such as Roy de Maistre and Grace Cossington Smith fit into a similar paradigm, although they are often absent from international scholarship on this topic. In this article, I seek to emphasise the important contributions of these Australian artists and demonstrate their interconnectivity with European proponents of the movement. I will expand upon the argument that *Thought Forms* (1901) by Charles Webster Leadbeater and Annie Besant, and *Man Visible and Invisible* (1902)[1] by Leadbeater were seminal texts in the construction of a Theosophically-based artistic movement. This is due to their resonance with the aims of modern abstraction in general.[2] Leadbeater and Besant's emphasis on the non-corporeal dimensions of humanity and their explorations of colour, form, and the spiritual dimensions of the universe validated the modern artistic search for internal realities, allowed for a conception of the artist as social altruist, and provided a framework for synaesthetic abstraction. This article will also provide a discussion of the ways in which Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1910) and Beatrice Irwin's *New Science of Color* (1916) added to the literary tradition that was the framework of Theosophy in modern abstraction.

Zoe Alderton is a PhD candidate and tutor in Studies in Religion at the University of Sydney.

[1] Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater, *Thought Forms* (Montana: Kessinger, 2003 [1901]); C.W. Leadbeater, *Man Visible and Invisible* (Montana: Kessinger, 1998 [1902]).

[2] Art history is replete with connections between *Thought Forms* (1901), *Man Visible and Invisible* (1902), and the expression of Theosophy in painting. This article describes just a few pertinent manifestations. Rudolf Steiner is also highly influential in the development of Theosophical and Anthroposophical art. Due to constraints of space this thread cannot be properly discussed in this article.

Disembodiment and Non-Corporeal Dimensions

To begin, I will outline the ways in which Theosophy, particularly under Leadbeater and Besant, coalesced with the aims of modern abstraction. What did abstract artists see in the writings of Leadbeater and Besant that caused them to engage so closely with their teachings? Both these figures, especially Leadbeater, validated a drive towards abstraction and representations of the spiritual dimensions of life via their preference for the mysterious above the phenomenological. The embodied self is ascribed far less importance than the inner self or soul. Leadbeater understands the physical body as the main source of toil and anxiety for humanity. Real freedom is only achieved through physical death.[3] His writings demonstrate a prioritising of the spiritual over the physical. Leadbeater states "Man *is* a soul" and suggests that the body belongs to one's spirit and not the other way around.[4] He reminds us that the life of a human should be viewed in terms of this soul, and not in terms of the body. Leadbeater minimises the significance of corporeal death, seeing it as merely "the point at which man drops his physical body." He views this occurrence as "not especially important"[5] and no more dramatic to the ego than the removal of a coat is to the physical person.[6] He refers to the deceased body as a "worn out garment."[7] Leadbeater understands the ego as the "real man," not the "bodies which on the lower planes represent him."[8] Thus, he and Besant draw on the notion of subtle bodies to detract from the primacy of one's corporeal form.[9]

Leadbeater's various writings on humanity and spirituality reinforce the notion of religion as something above and beyond the physical human body. For example, he criticises any readings of sacred symbols as phallic.

[3] C.W. Leadbeater, *Hidden Side of Christian Festivals* (Montana: Kessinger, 2003 [1920]), p. 336.
[4] C.W. Leadbeater, *The Chakras* (Wheaton: The Theosophical Publishing House, 2001 [1927]), p. 2.
[5] C.W. Leadbeater, *The Devachanic Plane* (Pomeroy: Health Research Books, 1996 [1896]), pp. 77-78.
[6] C.W. Leadbeater, *A Textbook of Theosophy* (New York: Cosimo, 2007 [1912]), p. 34.
[7] C.W. Leadbeater, *The Hidden Side of Things* (New York: Cosimo, 2007 [1913]), p. 208.
[8] C.W. Leadbeater, *Astral Plane: Its Scenery, Inhabitants, and Phenomena* (San Diego: The Book Tree, 2007 [1895]), pp. 22-23.
[9] For example, Annie Besant, *Talks With a Class* (Montana: Kessinger, 2003 [1922]), pp. 2-4, and Leadbeater, *Astral Plane*, pp. 21-22.

Leadbeater claims that obelisks, crosses, lotuses and so on are not based on representations of the phallus, and that one should clear one's mind of this "particularly gross delusion." He maintains that any religion practising "ceremonies of an indecent nature" is in a state of degeneration and lacking in true spiritual power. Leadbeater explains that faiths begin in a pure state, which dictates their expression of cosmogony. He believes that these 'pure' faiths explore the spiritual creation of ideas by the divine mind, not the embodied and profane creation of matter by sexual reproduction. Expression of the latter is only found in degraded systems of faith. Pure faith is presented as disembodied while obsession with the phallus is seen as "unclean."[10] Similarly, Besant rejects sexual urges as a brutish passion that must be trained and purified in order to progress. She sees the sexual instinct as a fruitful source of misery, degradation, and social evil. Bodies "of a higher type" can only be attained through self-control and denial of these physical urges.[11] Embodied reality is presented as inherently mundane and potentially harmful. Leadbeater and Besant encourage us to cast aside the physical world and look to the more essential and uncorrupted spiritual dimensions.

Congruently, abstract art is also concerned with a move beyond the purely physical. Although abstraction was by no means solely defined by Theosophical discourse, there is a resonance and compatibility between their aims and doctrines. If the illustrated plates of *Thought Forms* and *Man Visible and Invisible* are taken as artworks in their own right, they provide an exceptionally early rendition of abstraction within the Western artistic tradition. Their depiction of a non-physical or invisible reality via colour and form can be read as a precursor to the very idea of abstraction as well as an influence on particular symbology. Sixten Ringbom describes Theosophy as influential in the promulgation of "the spiritual as being formless in a physical, but not absolute sense." If artists were not able to comprehend the formless with their inner eye they could observe it in illustrations created through clairvoyant activity.[12] Kandinsky's seminal tome, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912) mentions the teachings of Blavatsky and the development of the Theosophical

[10] C.W. Leadbeater, *The Christian Creed: Its Origin and Signification* (New York: Cosimo, 2007 [1904]), pp. 72-73.
[11] Annie Besant, *Annie Besant: An Autobiography* (Montana: Kessinger, 2003 [1885]), pp. 216-217.
[12] Sixten Ringbom, 'Transcending the Visible: The Generation of the Abstract Pioneers', in *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, ed. Maurice Tauchman (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986), p. 137.

Society.[13] Although he is described as "[n]ever a proper Theosophist,"[14] Kandinsky can be read as a source of Theosophical inspiration and an important figure in the promulgation of shape and colour as reflections of the spiritual realm.

Ringbom correlates Kandinsky's growing interest in the occult with a gradual move away from depicting forms of the visual world.[15] Kandinsky responded to Leadbeater and Besant's idea of colour and emotion as interrelated phenomena.[16] Kandinsky also delineates between the material and the spiritual. He envisions physical objects and beings such as the spruce tree and lion in the former category, and places the more abstract concepts of artworks, moral principles, and religious ideas in the latter.[17] He spread these teachings to other influential early abstractionists. *On the Spiritual in Art* was highly regarded in Mondrian's circle.[18] Theosophy is cited as the cause of Mondrian's movement towards the spiritual and the universal, and also his interest in the spiritual qualities of certain geometric forms.[19] Reflecting this attitude, Mondrian felt that all life was directed towards evolution and that art should be used as a means of expressing this.[20] Many artworks discussed within this article will reflect a sense of spiritual development and movement towards a higher reality. Reynolds maintains that Kandinsky and Mondrian "make extensive use of theoretical writings in an attempt to encourage the sensitivity of spectators to the 'inner' effects of colour and form."[21] Theosophy

---

[13] Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. Michael T.H. Sadler (Montana: Kessinger 2004 [1910]), p. 22.
[14] Roger Lipsey, *The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Dover, 2004 [1988]), p. 36.
[15] Ringbom, 'Transcending the Visible', p. 136.
[16] Lipsey, *The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art*, p. 35.
[17] Wassily Kandinsky, *Point and Line to Plane*, trans. Howard Dearstyne and Hilla Rebay (New York: Dover 1979 [1926]), pp. 43-45.
[18] Dee Reynolds, *Symbolist Aesthetics and Early Abstract Art: Sites of Imaginary Space* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 35.
[19] Charles A. Cramer, *Abstraction and the Classical Ideal, 1860-1920* (Cranbury: Rosemont, 2006), p. 136. Blotcamp believes that Mondrian looked to "natural symbolism of the simple, everyday sort" that did not require specialised occult knowledge. He does not directly copy from the illustrative plates of *Thought Forms* and *Man Visible and Invisible*, choosing instead to depict motifs with radiating light, similar to that of an aura. See Carel Blotkamp, *Mondrian: The Art of Destruction* (London: Reaktion Books, 1994), p. 42.
[20] Blotkamp, *Mondrian*, p. 15.
[21] Reynolds, *Symbolist Aesthetics and Early Abstract Art*, p. 117.

is clearly beneficial to this aim. Susan Shantz believes that abstract art has, since *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, been "a recurrent locus for the spiritual."[22]

Kandinsky speaks about "the nightmare of materialism" from which the artist's soul tries to escape. He believed that the soul could flee from this world and transcend "[c]ruder emotions" like fear, joy, and grief. Instead, the artist may dwell in a more refined and subtle mindset.[23] These introductory comments to *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* anticipate a new age in which human culture can be moved from its focus on materialism and towards the inner, spiritual self. Based on this *zeitgeist*, abstraction can be read as a prioritisation of the internal life of the human. Peter Selz states that lyrical abstraction is "[c]haracterized by an intensely personal and subjective response by artists to their own feelings."[24] Early abstract art validated new responses to the chaos of modernity and deconstruction of grand narrative. Selz explains that the movement valued exploration into the unknown as part of a "romantic quest for the self" in the face of wartime atrocities, social conformity, and the development of mass-production. Selz sees abstract art as a search for personal autonomy and individual expression.[25] Similarly, Kandinsky writes of "striving towards the abstract, the non-material" in order to obey Socrates' command, "[k]now thyself."[26] He bridges eras of humanity, suggesting that the expression of "internal truths" by the 'Primitives' at the sake of external reality is comparable to the work of abstract artists.[27] Unsurprisingly, Theosophy is described as "powerful enough to point artists towards a new inwardness and the possibility of translating that inwardness into visible form."[28] Jenny McFarlane believes that the impact of the war amplified interest in Leadbeater's message in his new home of Sydney.[29] Like Europe, Australia

[22] Susan Shantz, '(Dis)integration as Theory and Method in an Artmaking Practice', in *Reclaiming the Spiritual in Art: Contemporary Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, eds Dawn Perlmutter and Debra Koppman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 62.
[23] Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, p. 12.
[24] Peter Selz, 'Gestural Abstraction', in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, eds Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 11.
[25] Selz, 'Gestural Abstraction', p. 11.
[26] Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, p. 27.
[27] Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, pp. 11-12.
[28] Lipsey, *The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art*, p. 37.
[29] Jenny McFarlane, 'A Theosophical Sydney: A Context for the Colour-Music Theory', *Symposium Papers: Colour in Art – Revisiting 1919 & R-Balson-/41*,

turned to modernism and its focus on the subconscious as a reaction to the end of the war.[30]

This exploration of the self through the refinement of an internal, universal language was often phrased as an oppositional move to the materialism and division of humanity that was characterised by the contemporaneous First World War. By virtue of its non-objective approach to representation, abstract art can be used as a means of reaching beyond culturally specific signs and erasing harmful and distracting distinctions between humans. Shantz speaks of Formalism as a universal language of art that corresponds to "religious descriptions of oneness."[31] In this sense, abstraction can be used as a validation of essential spiritual truth over delineated religious patterns of observation. Lipsey characterises this as a means to "explore a transpersonal world of meaning and energies."[32] He reminds us that modern artists concerned with the spiritual often tried to avoid "conventional sacred imagery."[33] Leadbeater also promoted a universalised spirituality, claiming that specificities of belief were only cultural and geographical variants of the same essential truth.[34] By attempting to convey the essential and non-specific notion of 'spirituality', rather than the doctrine and symbolism of a particular faith, abstract artists hoped to enact a supra-cultural movement in opposition to the divisive nature of war. An obvious comparison can be made here between the purpose of abstraction in art and the appeal of New Age faiths, Theosophy being the most significant ancestor of this movement. Paul Heelas speaks of the self as a spiritual resource within New Age discourse and mentions the act of going within oneself to seek perfection that cannot be found in the disappointing external realities of modernity and the horrors of war.[35] Both movements respond to a lack of faith in society and a prioritisation of autonomy and the internal powers of the individual.

Prioritisation of internal life also assists in the literal act of viewing and engaging with the canvas as a spiritually oriented object. One way of perceiving abstract art is a space in which the viewer must use the internal

---

Anthony Horderns' Fine Art Galleries, August 23, 2008 (Paddington: Ivan Dougherty Gallery, 2008), p. 23.

[30] Mary Eagle, *Australian Modern Painting Between the Wars 1914-1939* (Sydney: Bay Books, 1989), p. 9.

[31] Shantz, '(Dis)integration as Theory and Method in an Artmaking Practice', p. 62.

[32] Lipsey, *The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art*, p. 22.

[33] Lipsey, *The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art*, p. 45.

[34] C.W. Leadbeater, *World Mother as Symbol and Fact* (Montana: Kessinger, 2003 [1928]), p. 28.

[35] Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 135-136.

feelings roused by colour and shape in order to connect with the piece. When viewing an artwork, one may experience a sense of disembodiment. Images on the canvas are traced by the eyes, but most of the journey of engagement occurs within the mind and imagination.[36] Mary Eagle describes this as the new territory explored by post-war Australian modernists.[37] This experience reflects a valuation of the inner-self above the physical self as the true site of religious action. Shantz believes that the non-specific content of abstract painting creates a viewing experience that is comparable with the spiritual in the sense of something numinous and beyond the physical, phenomenological world. She believes that abstraction provides a valuation of spirit over matter and transcendence over immanence.[38] Lipsey argues, "abstract art was born a religious and metaphysical art."[39] It achieves this spiritual side through disembodiment. The viewer is required to move away from their attachment to the physical and engage through imagination, feeling, and spirit. Theosophy, particularly under Leadbeater and Besant's *Thought Forms*, mirrored the idea of colour and shape as reflections of a transcendental reality. Their methodology engages with the abstractionists' aim of speaking to and spiritually developing the inner self as a means of rejecting the tumultuous material realm, expressed as a denigration of the mimetic.

'Thought Forms' in Modern Painting and the Art of Evolution

Now that we have examined the relevance of Leadbeater and Besant's methodology to modern abstraction, the appearance of their ideas and imagery in specific artworks and *oeuvres* may be explored. Theosophical investigation did not lead to any particular generic conventions, nor did artists influenced by this belief system necessarily band together or form manifestos. Carel Blotkamp maintains that there is no clear 'style' of Theosophy in art. He argues that Blavatsky examined symbology and visual representations within a multitude of religions but did not "draw any conclusions that might form the basis for something that could be termed Theosophical art." Artists are guided

[36] Both Mary Warnock and Dee Reynolds offer a Kantian view of the interrelation of abstract art and human imaginative faculties. (This relationship is too multifarious to summarise here, but is worthy of consideration as an issue peripheral to this article). See Reynolds, *Symbolist Aesthetics and Early Abstract Art*, p. 8ff and Mary Warnock, *Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), *passim*.

[37] Eagle, *Australian Modern Painting*, p. 17.

[38] Shantz, '(Dis)integration as Theory and Method in an Artmaking Practice', p. 62.

[39] Lipsey, *The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art*, p. 21.

by their own preferences and individual approaches.[40] That being said, this does not mean that artworks inspired by Theosophical teachings are so disparate as to be incommensurable. Lipsey believes that Theosophy, via its second-generation members Leadbeater and Besant, was able to create a language that entered into mainstream twentieth century art.[41] Although this language is not stylistically defined enough to spawn a true genre, it can indeed be read in the work of Theosophically-inspired artists. Similarities between artworks can be observed, and can often be traced back to plates featured in *Thought Forms* and *Man Visible and Invisible*. In this article, particular attention will be paid to the symbol of a triangle and the symbol of radiating light.

To begin this investigation into abstraction and 'thought forms' it is worth considering the colour-based work of Roy de Maistre (born Roi de Mestre). De Maistre was educated at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music where he studied the viola.[42] This influence is vital when reading his abstract pieces. Alongside Roland Wakelin, he created the original and controversial 1919 'Colour in Art' exhibition. De Maistre produced charts and diagrams that equated the seven notes of the musical scale with seven successive colours. For example, the colour red corresponded to the note A.[43] This explanatory material speaks of synaesthesia and demonstrates the interactive and performative nature of the show. The audience for 'Colour in Art' were seated in rows. Paintings were brought up to the stage and their display was accompanied by music. Colour charts were made available and the artists spoke about their work.[44] Wakelin believed that exploring the realm of colour "enlarged our consciousness of the fundamentals of life" and expressed his wish to transfer this knowledge on to others. He also expressed a desire to absorb any truths received from the works of others as part of "a great scheme

[40] Blotkamp, *Mondrian*, p. 41.
[41] Lipsey, *The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art*, p. 34.
[42] Heather Johnson, *Roy de Maistre: The Australian Years 1894-1930* (Roseville: Craftsman's House, 1988), p. 15.
[43] Neils Hutchison, 'Colour Music – Decoding de Maistre: The Colour-Music Code', *Symposium Papers: Colour in Art – Revisiting 1919 & R-Balson-/41, Anthony Horderns' Fine Art Galleries, August 23, 2008* (Paddington: Ivan Dougherty Gallery, 2008), p. 26.
[44] Andrew McNamara, 'The Colour of Modernism: Colour-Form Experiments in Europe and Australia', in *Europa! Europa?: The Avant-Garde, Modernism and the Fate of a Continent*, eds Sascha Bru and Peter Nicholls (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), p. 496.

of synthetic spiritual progress."[45] The theory behind 'Colour in Art' demonstrates an engagement with Theosophical discourse and the actions of overseas abstract experimentations. Daniel Thomas maintains that 'Colour in Art' "reflected adventurous international *avant-garde* movements."[46] McFarlane agrees that it is "part of a larger conversation" shared by artists such as Kandinsky and Mondrian.[47] De Maistre's lecture at the 'Colour in Art' exhibition referenced the international emergence of colour-based movements.[48] He was most likely aware of ideas such as the connection between colour and the keyboard in the work of Morgan Russell and Stanton MacDonald-Wright, founders of the Synchromism movement.[49]

De Maistre believed in the non-physical powers of colour and music. He was interested in interior decoration and its impact upon the human psyche. His contribution to 'Colour in Art' included a 'Colour Organisation in Interior Decoration' segment, which showed home interiors based on colour music keys and contained discs and scales available for purchase.[50] De Maistre served with the Australian Army Medical Corps and devised a colour treatment programme for shell-shocked soldiers in 1917.[51] His colour harmonising chart for use in private homes was produced in 1924 and sold through the Sydney department store Grace Brothers.[52] This fits into the international development of chromotherapy. Eagle describes de Maistre's "religion of colour" as a tripartite force consisting of colour music, colour psychiatry, and colour

[45] Roland Wakelin, 'Colour in Art [1919]', in *Modernism & Australia: Documents on Art, Design and Architecture 1917-1967*, eds Ann Stephen, Andrew McNamara and Philip Goad (Carlton: Miegunyah, 2006), p. 63.
[46] Daniel Thomas, 'Modern Australia: Colour in Art 1910s-1950s', *Symposium Papers: Colour in Art – Revisiting 1919 & R-Balson-/41, Anthony Horderns' Fine Art Galleries, August 23, 2008* (Paddington: Ivan Dougherty Gallery, 2008), p. 3.
[47] McFarlane, 'A Theosophical Sydney', p. 23.
[48] Roy de Maistre, 'Colour in Relation to Painting [1919]', in *Modernism & Australia: Documents on Art, Design and Architecture 1917-1967*, eds Ann Stephen, Andrew McNamara and Philip Goad (Carlton: Miegunyah, 2006), p. 62.
[49] Thomas, 'Modern Australia', p. 6. This movement was based on the interrelationships of colour and sound. Adherents attempted to arrange colour and shape in a manner reflective of musical compositions. The use of colour scales allowed these works to be read as such.
[50] De Maistre, 'Colour in Relation to Painting [1919]', p. 63.
[51] Deborah Edwards, *Roy de Maistre Mural Room* (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1993), n/p.
[52] Johnson, *Roy de Maistre*, p. 30.

painting.[53] His colour experimentations were intended to have an impact beyond the world of decorative art.[54] De Maistre believed that colour could "bring the conscious realisation of the deepest underlying principles of nature."[55] This sentiment can be compared to the ideas of colour and music expressed in *Thought Forms* and *Man Visible and Invisible*. There is a connection between these Theosophical ideas and those of de Maistre. McFarlane believes that the work produced for 'Colour in Art' has a genealogy leading back to Leadbeater.[56] Australian Theosophical adherents were brought close to the work of Leadbeater when he moved to Sydney in 1915. His impact was dramatic and he is credited with boosting public interest in the movement. He provided frequent lectures on his correlations between colour, music, and spiritual reality.[57] De Maistre came into contact with Leadbeater's ideas at the Conservatorium of Music. Eagle believes this establishment "throbbed with a synaesthetic sensibility."[58] Staff members, such as Rose Seaton, had a strong relationship with the Sydney Theosophical Society. She gave a lecture-recital at King's Hall where various colours were represented through music. De Maistre's friend Henri Verbrugghen presented lectures and articles advocating the connection between Theosophy and the arts. He allowed Leadbeater to lecture at the Conservatorium while he was director. Leadbeater discussed topics including the way in which music in the material dimension is transformed into colour and form in the unseen plane.[59] The Contemporary Art Society lectures were held in the Theosophical Society's Adyar Hall in Sydney.[60]

Leadbeater's influence on de Maistre is clearly apparent in his 1919 work *Rhythmic Composition in Yellow-Green Minor*, painted just after the 'Colour in Art' show.[61] This work contains a beautiful arrangement of swirling pastel colours and shapes based on a synaesthetic depiction of music. Thomas

---

[53] Eagle, *Australian Modern Painting*, p. 44.
[54] Wakelin, 'Colour in Art', p. 63.
[55] de Maistre, 'Colour in Relation to Painting', p. 62.
[56] McFarlane, 'A Theosophical Sydney', p. 23.
[57] McFarlane, 'A Theosophical Sydney', p. 23. Leadbeater also gave Sydney lectures on *Man Visible and Invisible* and *Thought Forms* in 1915. See: John Cooper, 'The Theosophical Crisis in Australia: The Story of the Breakup of the Theosophical Society in Sydney from 1913 until 1923' (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Sydney, 1986), p. 83.
[58] Eagle, *Australian Modern Painting*, p. 44.
[59] McFarlane, 'A Theosophical Sydney', p. 24.
[60] Thomas, 'Modern Australia', p. 4.
[61] Thomas, 'Modern Australia', p. 3.

calls it Australia's first abstract painting.[62] Our eyes are trained to follow the canvas, left to right. The journey begins in darkness and concludes in the light. De Maistre's pathways lead us to a bright yellow disc, radiating soft pink tones. We are delivered from pure black into metallic gold. If we connect the shapes to music, it can be read as soft and drifting, but none the less profound. The song moves the viewer upwards into a brilliant, yellow end-point. This work is remarkably similar to the 'Wagner' plate from *Thought Forms*. In *Thought Forms* and *Man Visible and Invisible*, the practice of clairvoyance is used to depict the unseen substances of the non-physical realm. Various visual patterns, from an actor's first-night nerves to vague religious devotion, are replicated. Non-figurative colour and shape are used to convey these abstract concepts. *Thought Forms* deals with invisible manifestations created through music. Plates in the text include visualisations of organ music emanating from cathedrals. The cosmic vibrations caused by notes and chords may be observed. The particular colours indicate the octaves used.

Leadbeater believed that sounds generate colour that may be perceived by "an eye even slightly clairvoyant." He states that sounds create form just as thoughts do. These shapes may continue "in vigorous action" long after the sound stimulus has ended. Religious music from a church organ expands out into the ethereal, astral, and mental realms. The forms created can persist for several hours and effect all those in the vicinity of the music. In this way, the forms created by sound lead to general betterment (experienced to a greater degree by those who are sensitive than by those who are dull or preoccupied, but universal none the less).[63] The key plate in this discussion, depicting a piece by Wagner, is given particular praise for its mountainous shape and vivid colourisation. The effect of the music emanates far beyond the church itself, creating a glow of spiritual light amidst the darkness.[64] De Maistre's music seems to be more gentle and flowing than Wagner's complicated and multi-layered composition. Apart from this, there are many similarities, including colour. We see pastel green, purple, and pinks. Both images display orbs of colour made from layers of mauve, yellow, and blue. Leadbeater explains that a

[62] Thomas, 'Modern Australia', p. 3.
[63] Leadbeater, *The Hidden Side of Things*, pp. 174-176.
[64] The impact of this text can also be observed in North America. Canadian Lawren Harris' *Winter Comes from the Arctic to the Temperate Zone* (c.1935) has been compared to the 'Wagner' plate from *Thought Forms*. The compositional similarities are remarkably strong. Kandinsky has also been proposed as an influence for Harris, particularly in his mystical use of the triangle. See Ann Davis, *The Logic of Ecstasy: Canadian Mystical Painting 1920-1940* (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1992), pp. 116-119.

violet circle atop a blue ring, as seen in *Rhythmic Composition in Yellow Green Minor,* is a thought form indicative of aspiration and devotional thought.[65] The Sydney poets who, perhaps illegally, borrowed and sold the painting to the Art Gallery of New South Wales called it *Frozen Music*.[66] Indeed, this physical capture of the usually intangible world of sound can be read as a way of trapping the power and spiritual benefits of a moving composition. Considering de Maistre's connection to colour therapy, this may well be an attempt to emotionally and spiritually uplift his audience.

McFarlane suggests that even de Maistre's more figurative works of this era are "an arrangement of colour" based on Theosophical astral harmony as opposed to merely a representation of physical forms.[67] De Maistre's 1930s series, which includes works such as *C Major. Key of Yellow* and *G Major. Key of Violet* demonstrates a similar interrelatedness of colour and sound, reminiscent of a children's 'colour by numbers' activity. The *Colour Music* scrolls from 1934 are painted on to music rolls, making their connection to this field of expression quite obvious. The 'music' depicted on these rolls is unreadable in the traditional sense. It contains no concession to traditional notation, save the apparent sequential nature of the markings. The viewer must perceive sound through synaesthetic pathways. One is obliged to imagine how sound is represented in colour and form and must experience audio phenomena via visual data. Comparatively, Besant describes the ether as "invisible, inaudible, intangible" and says that it is as unknowable to our physical senses as colour is to the ear or as *sounds are to the eye*. The self wills organs to be formed as windows into the physical world.[68] Thus, based on this notion, de Maistre's painted synaesthesia can be read as a means of transcending this limiting physical interaction with the universe. It is a means of going beyond the primary function of our organs and entering into a relationship with forces above our normal comprehension. Kandinsky approaches music in a similar way. He considered music to be an influential form of expression in the search for a means of representing the realm of the soul as opposed to the physical world. He writes,

> the various arts are drawing together. They are finding in Music the best teacher. With few exceptions music has been for some centuries the art which has devoted itself not to the reproduction of natural

[65] C.W, Leadbeater, *The Inner Life* (Wheaton: The Theosophical Publishing House: 1978 [1911]), p. 278.
[66] Thomas, 'Modern Australia', p. 6.
[67] McFarlane, 'A Theosophical Sydney', p. 23.
[68] Besant, *Talks With a Class*, p. 192. My emphasis.

> phenomena, but rather to the expression of the artist's soul, in musical sound.
>
> A painter, who finds no satisfaction in mere representation, however artistic, in his longing to express his inner life, cannot but envy the ease with which music, the most non-material of the arts today, achieves this end. He naturally seeks to apply the methods of music to his own art. And from this results that modern desire for rhythm in painting, for mathematical, abstract construction, for repeated notes of colour, for setting colour in motion.[69]

Kandinsky felt that music could be translated into 'points': graphical, abstracted rendering of non-visual or three-dimensional phenomena on to the flat surface.[70] Hilla Rebay believes that Kandinsky became dissatisfied with representation and looked instead to the expression of his "inner life." A turning point was his realisation of "the musician's incorporeal freedom from earthly inspiration for his art."[71] Music was an influential concept in the modern process of turning art into a rendition of the self and the non-physical. Lipsey even calls music "that other abstract art."[72] This brings us back to the idea of abstraction as a vehicle for spiritual self-expression.

Using Leadbeater's methodology, music and art can be viewed as a means of moving beyond an attachment to the physical body. Leadbeater believes that "the great artist or the great musician almost forgets his physical body… when that artists dies he will not change." Conversely, those who live with too much emphasis on the physical body will have to find new interests and motivations after death.[73] In keeping with this idea, Theosophical abstraction often depicts the notion of progression and development towards a state of higher consciousness as influenced by the musical and visual realms. I will outline here one particular symbolic manifestation of this concept: the pyramid of personal development and spiritual hierarchy, and the radiant beams of enlightenment. This symbology, which is present in the work of numerous modern abstract artists, can often be traced back to concepts espoused within Theosophical discourse (in particular that of Leadbeater and Besant). A major artwork dealing with the pyramid or triangle symbology is *A Painted Picture of the Universe*, created by de Maistre between 1920 and 1934.[74] The direction of the work forces us from the bottom of the canvas up. It

---

[69] Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, pp. 27-28.
[70] Kandinsky, *Point and Line to Plane*, pp. 43-45.
[71] Quoted in Kandinsky, *Point and Line to Plane*, p. 8.
[72] Lipsey, *The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art*, p. 20.
[73] Leadbeater, *Hidden Side of Christian Festivals*, p. 336.
[74] This title may be a reference to the Elinor Wylie poem 'Parting Gift' (1922), which contains the line "With a painted picture of the universe/ And seven blue

begins with swirling lines that eventually form into recognisable shapes. These shapes are duplicated, creating a path leading upwards. This speaks of the ongoing progression of a triangle and the secret knowledge contained therein.[75] De Maistre draws us up to the top of the work where beams of pale violet light radiate. Hutchinson reads the elevation of shapes in de Maistre's work as an elevation of musical pitch.[76] This pitch can be read as a representation of the soul being uplifted through music. This reading is supported by the particular Theosophical implications of the triangle.

Kandinsky writes of the triangle in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. This text draws strongly upon Theosophical concepts of knowledge, humanity, and the universe. Kandinsky believed that viewing colours produced a psychological effect and "a corresponding spiritual vibration."[77] He ascribed colours and geometric shapes different affects. He saw harmonic possibilities between the two.[78] For example, red quickens the heart and reminds us of flame or blood.[79] It is a sharp colour that finds resonance with sharp shapes like a triangle.[80] Kandinsky used the triangle to represent "the life of the spirit." The lower portions of the shape are broad and represent the vast, unenlightened portions of humanity. As the triangle moves upwards, it narrows. Fewer people are wise enough to be at these elevated stages. The apex of the triangle houses a single man. Even those close to him do not understand his messages and call him mad. Each part of the triangle longs, on some level, for spiritual satisfaction. There is a constant movement upwards as what was once understood by the apex is then understood by those below it and so forth. When the triangle functions in a healthy manner, society progresses ever

---

tears within." See Elinor Wylie, 'Parting Gift', *Expansive Poetry Online* at http://www.expansivepoetryonline.com/journal/repo0298.html. Accessed 13/7/11. This poem is difficult to source in print, but can be found on select poetry archive websites.

[75] De Maistre's later works, such as *Crucifixion* (c.1957) retain a consideration for geometric shape as a communication device. In this particular artwork, the body of Christ hangs before a backdrop of overlapping triangles. Another triangle is formed by thin black lines across his body.

[76] Hutchison, 'Colour Music – Decoding de Maistre', p. 27.

[77] Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, p. 30. This notion has obvious connections to the idea of 'thought form' vibrations. See: Besant and. Leadbeater, *Thought Forms*, p. 11ff.

[78] Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, p. 34.

[79] Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, p. 30.

[80] Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, p. 34.

upward.[81] This idea has strong Theosophical connections. Kandinsky borrows from the Theosophical model of humanity, which shows individuals at different stages of spiritual development and places an enlightened Bodhisattva at their head. The symbol of the triangle has multiple meanings within Theosophical discourse.[82] Most obviously, it is the compositional basis for the Society's logo. Leadbeater and Besant speak of a triangular thought form. It is said to represent "an upward rush of devotion." This form belongs to someone who "knows in whom he has believed" and "one who has taught himself how to think."[83] This implies self-aware cognition and a sharp focus upon spiritual matters.

It is quite likely that Kandinsky's ideas of the triangle are connected to those of Leadbeater and Besant. Kandinsky was an avid reader of Theosophical texts, and was particularly interested in *Thought Forms* and *Man Visible and Invisible*.[84] Reynolds connects elements of the 1912 *Woman in Moscow* painting to the plates in this text.[85] The radiating coloured circles that hover around the composition are similar to those found in *Composition in Yellow Green Minor*, and the sky on the right-hand side of the image contains remarkably similar shapes to the 'Wagner' plate. The dark, coffin-like shape that hovers above the central woman may be a thought form made visible. Ringbom agrees that these are 'thought forms'.[86] Kandinsky has also been mentioned as a possible influence on de Maistre. Daniel Thomas believes that de Maistre and Wakelin were influenced by Willard Huntington Wright's 1915

---

[81] Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, pp. 15-17.

[82] Examination of the triangle within Theosophy is so vast an area that it would justify an article of its own. Antoine Faivre nominates the God/Human/Nature triangle as a key doctrine and common trait within Theosophical belief, perhaps explaining the primacy of this shape amongst disparate Theosophical movements. See Antoine Faivre, *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition: Studies in Western Esotericism*, trans. Christine Rhone (Albany: State University of New York Press 2000 [1996]). p. 7. In Theosophical literature, the three sides of the triangle are often used as a representation of three separate but intersecting principles. For example, George Arundale states that the work of the Theosophical Society is to "exalt in the hearts of men the Triangle of Friendship, Freedom and Unity." See George Arundale, *Freedom and Friendship: The Call of Theosophy and the Theosophical Society* (Adyar: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1935), p. 247.

[83] Besant and Leadbeater, *Thought Forms*, p. 31.

[84] Maurice Tauchman, 'Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art', in *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986), p. 35.

[85] Reynolds, *Symbolist Aesthetics and Early Abstract Art*, p. 36.

[86] Ringbom, 'Transcending the Visible: The Generation of the Abstract Pioneers', p. 140.

tome *Modern Painting*, which contained discussion of Kandinsky. He also suspects that the 1919 artwork *Syncromy, Berry's Bay* was inspired by Kandinsky's landscapes.[87] *A Painted Picture of the Universe* can be read as the reflections of an artist who has reached a higher point of understanding, or one who desires to do so. It is a celebration of thought, and suggests that music may be a means of expressing and exploring these higher, non-physical realms of consciousness. Grace Cossington Smith also engages with these ideas via *Eastern Road Turramurra* (1926). This image borrows from *A Painted Picture of the Universe*.[88] Cossington-Smith did not attend 'Colour in Art' although she did have a personal and professional relationship with Wakelin and de Maistre.[89] All three discussed their art and ideas together into the 1920s.[90] Deborah Hart connects the work of Grace Cossington Smith to de Maistre's *Berry's Bay* artworks, continuing on the chain of influence from Kandinsky. Hart also compares de Maistre's radiating waves in *Composition in Yellow Green Minor* to Cossington Smith's *Sea Wave* of 1931.[91] Both artworks use a similar vocabulary of colour and shape to the 'Wagner' plate of *Thought Forms*. *Sea Wave* was painted in Thirroul after the death of Cossington Smith's mother. Bruce James describes it as "a life-cast of the psyche, subtly paraded as landscape."[92] Through a depiction of the New South Wales coastline and its radiating waves, Cossington Smith revealed the pattern of her inner-life.

Eastern Road Turramurra presents a journey originally painted by de Maistre in a more recognisable context of the physical universe. The mauve bands of the horizon are rendered as the sky during twilight. De Maistre's golden pathway becomes the Eastern Road, and his blue rounded shapes become a strip of trees. Cossington Smith invites the viewer to travel through her local landscape, which leads up into the mystical sky. The road functions as a metaphor for upwards movement and a journey towards the heights. The work of Cossington Smith leads into the fourth influential text of modern

---

[87] Thomas, 'Modern Australia', pp. 4-5.
[88] This connection made thanks to Neils Hutchison, 'Colour Music in Australia: De-mystifying de Maistre', *Colour Music*, at http://home.vicnet.net.au/~colmusic/maistre.htm. Accessed 02/03/11.
[89] Thomas, 'Modern Australia', pp. 7-8.
[90] Deborah Hart, 'Beatrice Irwin and Grace Cossington Smith: Women on the Wings of Colour in Art', *Symposium Papers: Colour in Art – Revisiting 1919 & R-Balson-/41, Anthony Horderns' Fine Art Galleries, August 23, 2008* (Paddington: Ivan Dougherty Gallery, 2008), p. 17.
[91] Hart, 'Beatrice Irwin and Grace Cossington Smith', p. 20.
[92] Bruce James, *Grace Cossington Smith* (Roseville: Craftsman House, 1990), pp. 86-87.

Theosophical abstraction, Beatrice Irwin's *New Science of Color* (1916). Cossington Smith became interested in Theosophy in 1926.[93] She was heavily influenced by Irwin's text, although Hart believes she may have kept this guarded due to her family's strong Anglican beliefs.[94] Irwin was of the Baha'i faith and promoted the metaphysical qualities of colour. Her book was written in 1916 with a Theosophical framework. Irwin was engaged with Theosophy until at least 1933.[95] Her worldview is sympathetic to that of Leadbeater and Besant. Irwin's colour chart, represented in the form of an upwards pointing triangle, delineates the realms of physical, mental, and spiritual. The different emotional functions of colours within these three realms are described.[96] Positioned at the start of her text, this chart acknowledges the existence of the same planes as discussed by Leadbeater and Besant, and implies that colour and emotion have a direct correlation. Her work involves notions of spiritual synaesthesia. Irwin was known for her 'colour-poem recitals' with an experimental, scientific bent. She describes these evenings as a means of testing the effects of colour in a philosophical research context.[97] Hart believes that *Eastern Road, Turramurra* is based on Irwin's lessons about working intuitively with colours and engaging with their vibrations. Her choices correspond with the idea of a path between the senses and the soul if one examines them via Irwin's methodology.[98] Cossington Smith copied out the entire text by hand in 1924, demonstrating a deep engagement and familiarity with its content.[99] James agrees that "[t]he idea of vibrations emanating from colour to express a spiritual condition is fundamental in Cossington Smith."[100]

De Maistre was also acquainted with Irwin's work. Both he and Cossington Smith were interested in the profound effects of colour via interior design. Cossington Smith investigated how colours in a room may affect emotional states or assist in rest and sleep.[101] This may well have been

[93] James clarifies that her interest was due to a predilection for mysticism as opposed to a specific attachment to a Theosophical code of behaviour. See James, *Grace Cossington Smith*, p. 66.
[94] Hart, 'Beatrice Irwin and Grace Cossington Smith', p. 18.
[95] McFarlane, 'A Theosophical Sydney', p. 24.
[96] Beatrice Irwin, *New Science of Color* (Montana: Kessinger, 2003 [1916]), p. 1.
[97] Irwin, *New Science of Color*, p. 97.
[98] Hart, 'Beatrice Irwin and Grace Cossington Smith', p. 20.
[99] Hart, 'Beatrice Irwin and Grace Cossington Smith', p. 19.
[100] James, *Grace Cossington Smith*, p. 67.
[101] Hart, 'Beatrice Irwin and Grace Cossington Smith', p. 19. Cossington Smith was also influenced by her teacher, Anthony Dattilo Rubbo, who urged her towards an exploration of colour. Rubbo read his students a letter by Van Gogh in which he

influenced by Irwin's work on colour healing and therapy.[102] Irwin refers to colour as "the spiritual speech of every living thing."[103] De Maistre used this phrase himself in the catalogue for 'Colour in Art'.[104] It is found in a segment of the book titled 'Colour as Indication of Evolution', which outlines progression through hue. In this lesson, Irwin shows that the green of summer is followed by the orange of autumn as the seasons continue their cycle. Colour indicates a present state and forecasts what is to come.[105] She also sees colour as a force that can change the character of nations and those who dwell within them. Chinese poetry of the Tang dynasty and Confucian philosophy are said to take their sublime and stoic qualities from the "transparent azure, lavender, indigo, emerald, and rose" colourations of the Chinese landscape. One needs only to view the cherry and peach bloom of that nation to feel the sense of calm that Irwin finds in Chinese literature.[106] Irwin's colour theory functions as an explanation of social development and as a language through which one may read emotion or foster spiritual development. McFarlane uses *New Science of Color* to decode the triangle on the front of the 'Colour in Art' invitation. She reads the selection as indicative of "a balance of spiritual and mental recuperative and stimulant colours."[107] Cossington Smith describes her relationship with painted colour and shape as natural, unforced, and "half unconscious."[108] This matches Irwin's idea of colour as something intuitive and internalised in the rhythms of humanity.

Irwin's thoughts on colour science resonate strongly with the aforementioned aims of social change as espoused by the abstract art movement and Kandinsky in particular. Irwin promoted the concept of progress, citing the breakdown of old structures. She writes, "our planet stands at an unparalleled crisis in the history of her evolution" thus "clearing the ground for fresh growth." Irwin prioritises spiritual and mental growth and warns that evolution may have been too focused on the development of

---

recounted the act of painting his bedroom with a focus on the effects of colour. Cossington Smith explored this in her own works. Her interior scenes epitomise the notion of colour as an affective force. See Eagle, *Australian Modern Painting*, p. 37. Rubbo also taught de Maistre.

[102] Irwin, *New Science of Color*, p. 61.

[103] Irwin, *New Science of Color*, p. 10.

[104] McFarlane, 'A Theosophical Sydney', p. 24.

[105] Irwin, *New Science of Color*, pp. 10-12.

[106] Irwin, *New Science of Color*, pp. 14-16.

[107] McFarlane, 'A Theosophical Sydney', p. 24.

[108] Cossington Smith [1970] in Hart, 'Beatrice Irwin and Grace Cossington Smith', p. 19.

machinery and may soon reach a crisis point where the mechanism is exalted above the mind that made it. She states, in her post-war context, that "lust and rapine" denounce Truth and must be rescinded for the sake of positive human evolution.[109] This idea of evolving past division and the physical realm fits very easily into the previously discussed influential texts. These sources imply that humanity is standing on the brink of change and may now choose to reject the conditions that led to war. In this context, it is unsurprising that the triangle/pyramid symbology has been depicted as a path to enlightenment.

Enlightenment as Pyramid

This article will now turn to expressions of this enlightenment itself and examine connections between this symbology and the images of *Thought Forms* and *Man Visible and Invisible*. A useful starting point is the Swedish Hilma af Klint, often named as a fundamental Theosophical artist.[110] She is known to have owned a copy of *The Secret Doctrine*.[111] Af Klint reported extrasensory experiences as a teenager.[112] The premature death of her younger sister inspired her in a spiritual direction. Af Klint led a weekly group in automatic drawing lessons, and adapted this technique into her own paintings.[113] She did not understand the meanings of her own work, which was upsetting to her.[114] Despite this, the vital importance of colour and shape in reading her output is evident.

Altar Painting Number One (1915) depicts a triangle leading up to a radiant sun. This circular form illuminates the apex of the shape beneath it. Af Klint was part of a mathematically inclined family, which can be seen in her

[109] Irwin, *New Science of Color*, pp. 1-5.

[110] Af Klint met Steiner in 1908 and changed over to his system of Anthroposophy in 1921. See Maurice Tauchman, 'Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art', pp. 39-40. Af Klint has been described as the opposite to Kandinsky because her Theosophical-based experimentation was unconscious while his was rigorous and precise. See Åke Fant, 'The Case of the Artist Hilma af Klint' in *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986), p. 156. Artists often saw Theosophy as an opposition to spiritualism. Af Klint is often seen as a representation of the latter. See Bernard Smith, *Modernism's History: A Study in Twentieth-Century Art and Ideas* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1998), p. 71. Despite this, *Altar Painting Number One* shows an engagement with Theosophical doctrine and pre-dates her conversion to Anthroposophy.

[111] Fant, 'The Case of the Artist Hilma af Klint', p. 163.

[112] Fant, 'The Case of the Artist Hilma af Klint', p. 155.

[113] Tauchman, 'Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art', p. 39.

[114] Fant, 'The Case of the Artist Hilma af Klint', p.158.

rigorous geometric approach to spiritual form.[115] Her horizontal divisions represent different planes of experience, based on the Theosophical model of existence. These layers lead to the ultimate plane of grace. Af Klint believed that she had entered these higher realms through her clairvoyant skills. Her painting leads us beyond physical reality and into the spiritual realm.[116] The use of a triangle indicates the rarity of those who exist on these higher levels. The highest level of all, the radiant sun, transcends even the apex of this shape. This sun is very similar to that used by Roger Kemp, another Australian Theosophist. Kemp attended Theosophical meetings at Collins Street and availed himself of the library.[117] Kemp demonstrates an interest in the physical properties of sound. In works such as *Landscape in Music* (1939-1945), he depicts waves of sound in thick brushstrokes. The painting is full of movement, radiating amidst poles in the landscape and overlayed with subtle white lines. The claustrophobic artwork deals with physical manifestations of the invisible, suggesting it takes place on an unseen plane. His *Music Forms* and *Dance Forms* artworks seem to paraphrase the notion of 'thought forms'. Many of Kemp's works show humans transforming into transcendent creatures.[118] This ultimate state of enlightenment is a vital symbol within his body of work. *Metamorphosis* depicts a radiant sun and humans transfigured into bizarre forms. They seem to morph due to the power of the rays. The luminescence of this radiation spreads across the artwork with a blinding intensity, touching all before it.

This radiant sun, found in multiple artworks, can be traced back to Theosophical literature, particularly that which pertains to the human aura. Besant and Leadbeater view the mental body as something of great beauty that becomes more radiant and lovely as the intellect develops. Pure and sublime thoughts create vibrations that appear as "a marvellous play of colour, like that in the spray of a waterfall as the sunlight strikes it." The astral or desire-body is less subtle, and energy channelled towards passional activities or objects of desire exists on this level. The 'undeveloped' person has an aura comprising mainly of this substance, represented in dull hues that can only disappear through the cultivation of selflessness.[119] In keeping with this notion, *Man Visible and Invisible* uses colour and shape to explain the characteristics and levels of enlightenment in particular test cases. Astral bodies are illustrated

[115] Fant, 'The Case of the Artist Hilma af Klint', p.155.
[116] Fant, 'The Case of the Artist Hilma af Klint', p.158.
[117] Christopher Heathcote, *The Quest for Enlightenment: The Art of Roger Kemp* (Australia: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 50-52.
[118] Heathcote, *The Quest for Enlightenment*, pp. 50-52.
[119] Besant and Leadbeater, *Thought Forms*, pp. 6-8.

with attention paid to subtlety of shape and colour. These bodies are ranked in order of spiritual development. Particular archetypes such as 'the miser' and 'the scientific' type are shown. The plate depicting the 'savage' shows him contained within his own bubble. His colours are subdued and without shape. Conversely, the advanced pupil has broken these boundaries and is seen to radiate a powerful light. Colours here are organised and circular with elements of pure light breaking through. The causal body of the advanced student is highly reminiscent of Kemp's metamorphic sun. Both suggest that radiance from a brilliant source can influence the rest of humanity. Compare this to the apex of Kandinsky's triangle where the genius disseminates wisdom downwards. This source of brilliance atop a pyramid is abundantly clear in the work of af Klint and de Maistre. There is an obvious correlation of imagery between these Theosophical artists. Enlightenment is shown through a visual journey. Brilliant discs of sunlight and a road to beams of light are shared by most of the images in this paper.

The sense of oncoming social change in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* and *New Science of Color* suggests that humanity must rise up and choose a higher path. The artworks discussed in this article depict an advance towards refined and subtle existences. The abstract movement explored the internal, emotion effects of colour and form and promoted this as a means of transcending the crude and violent physical universe that spawned war and division. We have already seen the ways in which Leadbeater and Besant's text are supportive of these aims. To conclude, the notion of altruism will be explored and art will be demonstrated as a means of passing on spiritual illumination. 'Thought forms' are described as infectious manifestations. Besant and Leadbeater state that thought vibrations can radiate and strike other mental bodies.[120] Leadbeater explains that 'thoughts forms' and vibrations that are constructed from mundane topics such as algebra or geometry are confined to the mental plane. Those created by spiritual thought and concerned with feelings of love and unselfishness reach a higher level and can affect all mental bodies within reach.[121] For example, Leadbeater felt that military music was able to strengthen the astral bodies of soldiers.[122] He writes that a person can construct a 'thought form' intentionally and aim it at another person as a means of assisting them. In this way, they may "serve humanity."[123] Because of this,

[120] Besant and Leadbeater, *Thought Forms*, p. 11.
[121] C.W. Leadbeater, *Some Glimpses of Occultism* (Montana: Kessinger, 2003 [1903]), p. 232. Selfish thoughts may also be transmitted in this manner, and Leadbeater warns against them.
[122] Leadbeater, *The Hidden Side of Things*, p. 179.
[123] Leadbeater, *A Textbook of Theosophy*, p. 29.

Besant and Leadbeater claim "every man who thinks along high lines is doing missionary work."[124] Ringbom viewed artworks as 'thought forms' in their own right.[125] This attitude is supported by the self-conception of artists seeking social change. By creating elevating artworks that spread 'thought forms' into the minds of viewers, the artist can be seen as an altruistic leader who passes on the key to enlightenment. Kandinsky certainly agreed with this notion. He writes,

> [a]nd so the arts are encroaching one upon another, and from a proper use of this encroachment will rise the art that is truly monumental. Every man who steeps himself in the spiritual possibilities of his art is a valuable helper in the building of the spiritual pyramid which will some day reach to heaven.[126]

To combine music with painting is to reach a deeper level of expression. Kandinsky's ideal artist is a "valuable helper" in the construction of a pyramid to enlightenment. There is an impotence to create meaningful art that will transmit spiritual elevation and a movement towards the non-physical realms. It is unsurprising that this fundamental aim of the abstract movement is so commonly represented by the symbol of a triangle reaching up towards a radiant light.

Conclusion

Although there is no distinct genre of Theosophical art, nor did Theosophy alone spawn modern abstraction, artworks and symbols within this movement can be traced back to a Theosophical source of inspiration. It is important to consider the presence of Australian modernists in this paradigm in order to understand the international significance of Theosophy on the arts. Leadbeater and Besant's prioritisation of the spiritual and disembodied over the mundane and corporeal resonated with the aims of modern abstraction. This movement, especially under Kandinsky and his *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, criticised the materialism, destruction, and violence of the wartime period. These artists supported a movement towards the inner-self via an art that examined non-physical realms as opposed to representations of external realities. Comparatively, Leadbeater and Besant's 'thought forms' are something above and beyond the corporeal. The writers speak of inner states and validate movement towards refinement and high thoughts. Their texts also outline the ways in which the forces of music and colour impact upon the self, something mirrored in Irwin's *New Science of Color*. Leadbeater and Besant's

[124] Besant and Leadbeater, *Thought Forms*, p. 12.
[125] Ringbom, 'Transcending the Visible', p. 137.
[126] Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, pp. 27-29.

methodology is helpful in terms of expressing non-physical states, assisting in social change, and validating conceptual issues pertaining to engagement with non-figurative images. It is thus unsurprising that modern abstractionists, many of whom were interested in alternative religious viewpoints, should use these texts as a basis for their aims and symbology. The visual language and spiritual framework of *Thought Forms* and *Man Visible and Invisible* are able to provide a way through the crisis point of modernity and depict a path towards higher consciousness. Via de Maistre's painted music and Cossington Smith's landscapes based on the human psyche, the viewer is presented with a means of engaging with this elevated spiritual level. Through a conception of the artist as cultural innovator and altruist, modern abstractionists were able to employ 'thought forms' as a means of helping their audience develop their inner consciousness and reach higher levels of subtlety and refinement. The act of painting music to move beyond the traditional physical senses, the symbol of the triangle showing a path to higher consciousness, and the symbol of radiating enlightenment can all be traced back to these seminal Theosophical texts, which can be seen as core references for the aims and language of modern abstraction.