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## **Frithjof Schuon: Metaphysician and Artist**

“Foreword” to *The Feathered Sun: Plains Indians in Art and Philosophy*  
(World Wisdom, 1990)

Frithjof Schuon was born in Basle, Switzerland, on June 18, 1907. His father, a great concert violinist and teacher at the Basle Conservatory of Music, was a native of southern Germany, while his mother came from an Alsatian family. Until the age of thirteen Schuon lived in Basle and attended school there, but the untimely death of his father obliged his mother, for reasons of economy, to return with her two young sons to her family in Mulhouse, France; and thus it was that Schuon received a French-language education in addition to his German one. At sixteen, Schuon left school to become self-supporting as a textile designer—a type of work which made only the most modest demands upon the remarkable artistic talent that he had as yet been given little opportunity to develop. As a child he had already taken much pleasure in drawing and painting, but he never received any formal training in the arts.

As a boy, Schuon had heard much about the Indians from his paternal grandmother, who as a young girl had spent some time in Washington D.C. There she had become personally acquainted with a Sioux member of a delegation of chiefs to the nation’s capital, and although she was not allowed to accept his offer of marriage, she never forgot her Indian friend or his people and later transmitted her love and admiration for the Indians to her children and grandchildren.

After painting scenes of Plains Indian life for several years, Schuon finally met and made friends with a number of members of the Crow tribe in Paris, in the winter of 1953. They had come to Europe to give performances under the auspices of Reginald Laubin and his wife, the well-known performers and preservers of traditional American Indian dances. After Paris, several of the group came to Lausanne, Switzerland for a week of vacation between their theatrical engagements, in order to visit the Schuons—notably Thomas Yellowtail, who subsequently became an important medicine man and a leader of the Sun Dance religion. Five years later, the Schuons traveled to Brussels in order to meet a group of sixty Sioux who had come to give Wild West performances in connection with the World’s Fair, and with some of whom they developed a lifelong friendship.

These meetings paved the way for the Schuons’ first visit to America, in the summer of

1959, when they were warmly welcomed on the Sioux reservations in South Dakota, and the Crow reservation in southern Montana. In the company of Indian friends they visited other tribes of the Plains and had the opportunity to attend a Sun Dance at Fort Hall, Idaho, on the Shoshoni-Bannock reservation. When at Pine Ridge, the Schuons were adopted into the family of Chief James Red Cloud, a grandson of the great chief known to history. The old chief gave Schuon the name of Wambali Ohitika—Brave Eagle—the name of his famous forbear's brother. Later, at an Indian festival in Sheridan, Wyoming, the Schuons were officially received into the Sioux tribe, and Schuon was given the name of Wicahpi Wiyakpa—Bright Star. His wife also received a name from Chief Red Cloud and another at Sheridan, but she gives preference to her first Indian name, Wambali Oyate Win—Eagle People Woman—given to her by old Black Elk, the renowned Sioux medicine man, through the intermediary of their mutual friend Joseph Brown, at the time he was recording Black Elk's explanation of the Sioux rites.\*

In 1963, the Schuons visited the Plains tribes a second time, spending the summer among their Indian friends and once again attending a Sun Dance at Fort Hall. During this trip, Schuon took the opportunity to visit the grave of Black Elk in Manderson, South Dakota, and to spend some time with the venerable medicine man's son Benjamin in the Black Hills. He had already met him during his first trip to the West and then again in the fall of 1962 when the Schuons spent several days in his company in Paris.

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The artistic works of Frithjof Schuon are oil paintings, whose height and width rarely exceed 24 inches. From a stylistic point of view, they combine the traditional rules of pictorial art with the technique of Western painting. Although traditionalist in his observance of certain elementary principles, Schuon limits himself neither to the style of icons nor to that of Oriental art.

The traditional rules just alluded to are these: to avoid a strict observance of the laws of perspective and to use neither foreshortening nor shading—shading, however, being permitted to the extent that relief in faces and bodies may require, as the example of various icons demonstrates. The fact that Schuon combines these rules with a kind of intellectual rigor on the one hand and an adequate observation of Nature on the other gives to his painting a powerful originality and exceptional expressiveness. In short, he combines the positive features of Western art with the rigor and symbolism of the Egyptian wall painting or the Hindu miniature. Perhaps one could say that Schuon's work, as regards its technical aspects, lies somewhere

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\* *The Sacred Pipe*, recorded and edited by Joseph Epes Brown, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1953.

between the Hindu miniature and expressionism, while at the same time being flavored with a certain influence from Japan.

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The artistic side, with Schuon, springs from a consciousness of universal symbolism; for God manifests His Qualities through beauty. There is the beauty of virgin Nature and of man and of art; genuine and legitimate art always has something of the sacred in it, whether directly or indirectly. Man lives by Truth and by Beauty; Schuon writes books and paints pictures. His books express the metaphysical doctrine in which all the religious systems and all the spiritual methods have their origin; he thus takes his stand in the perspective of the *philosophia perennis*. In his paintings, Schuon's intention is to express inward truths, and he does this in a manner that is quite simple, spontaneous and natural, and without any affectation of didactic symbolism. Fundamentally, what he portrays are higher realities as lived through the medium of his own soul, and he does so by means of human portraits and scenes taken for the most part from the life of the Plains Indians. But he has also painted a number of pictures of the Virgin-Mother, not in the style of Christian icons but in the form of the Biblical Shulamite or the Hindu *Shakti*.

Much of Schuon's intellectual knowledge may be accounted for in terms of his extraordinary aesthetic intuition. It suffices for him to see—in a museum, for example—an object from a traditional civilization, to be able to perceive, through a sort of “chain reaction,” a whole ensemble of intellectual, spiritual and psychological principles which operate within that world. An important point in his doctrine is that beauty is not a matter of taste, thus of subjective appreciation, but that, on the contrary, it is an objective and hence obligating reality; the human right to personal affinity—or to “personal selection,” if one likes—is altogether independent from aesthetic discrimination, that is to say from the understanding of forms.

Schuon has written in one of his letters: “What I seek to express in my paintings—and indeed I cannot express anything other—is the Sacred combined with Beauty. Thus, spiritual attitudes and virtues of soul. And the vibration that emanates from the paintings must lead inward.”

Barbara Perry