

Peter Nagy

Gallery Owner

'Looking at art is my way of praying'

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Peter Nagy is a gallery owner.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It is a term I actually hold in high regards. Of course you may associate it with organized religion and all the awful things men have done in its name. But for myself, everything is pretty much about art. And it is only in the last two centuries that art has been divorced from religion in a very conscious way. So it is hard for someone as deeply involved in the arts not to have great respect for religions, as so many fantastic things have been created thanks to them. And of course you learn a lot about religions along the way.

I was originally very deeply interested in Islamic arts. It is actually one of the things that led me to India. I always wanted to come to India, but when I came for the first time in 1990, in my perception, I was very much coming to an Islamic country – in the sense that it was the entry point and culture I would understand. Especially as I first came to northern India, which easily talked to me with all its Moghul architecture and art. Then I got exposed to Jain, Hindu and Buddhist art.

Today, if I had to pick just one religion and could only see the art produced by that religion, I would pick Buddhism. The range of Buddhist art through different cultures and how it changed over time is simply staggering.

What about Buddhist philosophy?

I cannot say I am a serious fan or student of its philosophy or that it has impacted my life very much. I was much more impacted by the study of Islamic philosophy and felt very close to it.

What appealed to you in the philosophy of Islam?

As someone raised as a Christian I guess it felt sort of familiar. Also, I liked the way the complexity of decorative motives was a substitute for form. As I studied Islamic art I felt those were metaphors for social constructions, as well as psychological metaphors. I felt their richness. For instance, I loved what I experienced in Istanbul, sitting in the Sulaimaniya mosque, feeling in a perfect continuum as the patterns of the carpet, the walls and the building were this perfectly resolved puzzle, which held a place for the human as a jewel. Hinduism does that also within its temples but maybe not to the same refined perfection.

I love decorative arts in any case, so the excitement of those carpets, interiors, ceramics explains my excitement for Islamic art as it incorporates all those things on an equal platform.

Did you have a religious upbringing?

I was raised as an Episcopalian. Going to Sunday school was more like babysitting for my mother. By the time I was an adolescent we were only going to church on Christmas and Easter. So it was no a very religious family and I never had a conversation about it with my father. He was certainly agnostic if not an atheist. My mother was not really devout either.

By the time I was a teenager I was an agnostic with a typical distaste for authority, therefore a distaste for the church's system. It is not until my first trip to Egypt many years later that I felt a real connection with religion. It also was my first trip to the developing world. And it really pulled the rug from beneath my understanding of the world. That is when I became nuts about Islamic art and then moved towards India.

What was the force pushing you on that journey?

Well, New York in the eighties was party time and crazy amazing things happening in the arts. It was really exciting. But definitely very Marxist oriented.

Then one of my main interests in coming to India was a really deep interest in spiritual architecture. It was the next step after Islamic architecture in the Middle East.

What about ideas like destiny or karma, so prominent in India?

I definitely believe in predestination. We only have a façade of freewill. We feel we make decisions but in the end it is all predetermined. Everything is this infinitely calibrated puzzle that is somehow already complete.

When I came here I did not think I would stay for the rest of my life. But then things happened, things unfolded, and I stayed.

I was on a quest, but a quest for more knowledge about arts and architecture.

Then something special happened - at the Golden Temple in Amritsar. Temples are vehicles for energy, they are machines to focus energy. If you leave yourself open to that, it just happens.

I came without knowing a single person in the country and with very little money. Later on I started reading about mysticism and mystical traditions. And in retrospect I realized I had put myself in a monk-like state, without knowing it. I had massive amounts of time travelling alone all over the country, having very little social contact with anybody, not really eating much, almost fasting, in unbelievably hot conditions.

Then I went to Amritsar.

Sikhism appealed to me, as it had taken the best aspects of Hinduism and combined them with some Sufism and some Buddhism. So on a very hot June night at the Golden Temple, I saw a family sitting with a little baby. At some point the little child got up and walked. In that moment, just watching this simple scene, it was as if everything came together, as if all existence seemed absolutely perfect and completely preordained. None of it could be by chance. It was obviously completely created by a higher being. There was just irrefutable proof to me in that very moment.

It was such a powerful experience. And it made me realize how much spirituality is completely about the heart and not about the mind. I had grown up and had been the product of a social construct for which it is all about the mind, not about the spirit - including in the arts. In that moment I experienced both a kind of enlightenment and a realization that I had been trying all those years to perceive those things with my mind, whereas it was all about a bolt in the heart. I could just not explain it in any other way. It was a feeling I could not deny. A feeling so strong that it gave me complete faith.

So it implied the existence of a divine force?

Absolutely. Of an omnipotent Creator that knows exactly what He or She is doing and that is completely in control of everything.

So as I look at our reality, I feel it may all be leela, and we would simply be here for the amusement of the gods.

In that context, does each one of us have a specific purpose?

Of course.

What would be yours?

Of course to try and be good. Then there is this kind of maya that we go through to make a life for ourselves and we say we love creating, we love dealing with art and so on. It does not have an impact on a higher plane. Only, maybe, on the human plane.

But if there is any human endeavor that does tip its toe in that higher direction, it would be art. And that is why I am so attracted to it. And it not only is about the connection between art and organized religion. It also is very true for contemporary art. When I see works by Rothko, it is a deeply spiritual construct. They also are very sexual of course. I see them all about that space of bodies rubbing up against each other, those membranes we have trying to permeate with somebody else's.

What about the idea of the soul and rebirth?

Yes, it definitely talks to me. After that experience in 1993 at the Golden Temple I became much more interested in Sikhism. I didn't cut my hair and beard for three years and I started thinking if that was a path I wanted to go on. But I knew myself too well. I knew that I would always wonder about the latest fashion collection in London as well! That's simply where I am at this stage of rebirth. I don't feel like a particularly elevated person on the spiritual realm. So I just didn't feel it was my calling in this lifetime. And then I got really busy setting up Nature Morte in 1997, trying to ground myself, running a business, hoping that I would live long enough to retire and have more time for those things. The only thing I have pursued is a yoga path, but that is more a physical aspect.

What about meditation or prayer?

Looking at art is my way of praying. I get to travel around the world and look at art. What a privilege! And it is a pretty sublime experience most of the time.

What about when you create?

I haven't really had time for it. I haven't created art of my own in five years. Because what I do here is extremely creative. I am involved with a number of artists in their production, working as an editor or collaborator, working on how to present it to the public etc. Really being very close. And it all is quite satisfying.

As a kid you knew you would be involved with the arts?

Not really. Like most kids I first wanted to be a veterinarian and then a zoologist. But this was the sixties, and I was pretty aware of what was going on. I wanted to be a hippy. This whole movement was not only about fashion or music. People were convinced they would profoundly change the world. And of course India was a big part of it. The hippy movement was very informed by things Indian. So I guess India started resonating with me back then.

In any case, I remember being pretty young, around 10 or 11 and thinking that the only really valuable thing to get involved with was art. For the next life I guess I would choose religion or spirituality. In this one it was a more material reality. The world and politics were a mess and art was somehow a higher calling.

At times of real difficulty and challenge, where is your anchor?

In arts. But not in my own creations. Because with other people's creations you can just stand in front of them and be touched, be energized by their beauty and so on. Whereas with your own art, it gets all more complicated, as it gets entangled with your own ego issues. Putting an object out there in the world that would stand out for everything you are, then seeing how it compares to what others do – it is really very difficult!

I think a lot of artists' best art is done when they are young, simply because they have a certain naivete, they are exploding with ideas, and they just boldly go for it. Whereas the more you learn about art, the more self critical you become and the harder it is to make art. By the time you get to my

age, the easiest thing in the world is to get yourself out of making art. You have seen so much art, including bad art, that you don't feel like doing anything else.

Art is a matter of the soul. Isn't it dangerous to mix it with business, with money?

It does pollute it in some ways. Art dealing is work and it is a business too. And it can be painful. Also the artists themselves can sometimes be extremely unpleasant. But over the years I have reached a place where I pretty much only work with people I enjoy; or I respect their work so much that I can deal with the rest.

And in any case that's only ten or twenty artists. I can enjoy the others without that business component attached to it. Though I must say that contemporary art will always be a field of competition for me. When I go and see a contemporary art show at a museum I may have a tinge of resentment and jealousy—why haven't they bought from me? But once I have turned the corner to the ancient Chinese section or the 19th century painting section, then it is pure pleasure.

If there were one question you could ask God, what would you ask?

There is a metaphor I like: when a child cannot comprehend calculus, does it mean calculus doesn't exist? I simply don't think the human brain can comprehend what God is. So asking God a question is a mute point. I don't communicate with God. There are moments of clarity when I feel God exists in some way. But nothing beyond that.

As there is such a thing as reincarnation according to you, what would you choose for the next round?

A friend of mine claims you can choose through the actions of your life what the next round will be. He says that as soon as you die the soul gets reborn within seconds.

I do subscribe to the belief that we have lived through hundred of thousands of lives. It all seems too strong that it would simply be extinguished after this.

But I don't know what I would choose for the next one. I like to think it will be a surprise! You just hope that you are doing enough good that you won't suffer in the next one.

What is your idea of happiness?

There are millions and millions of ideas of happiness. It just goes on and on.

Is contentment part of it?

It partly is. And I must say, I feel very content. I still have things to do, I still have objectives. But were I to die tomorrow I would be completely satisfied about this life. I did everything I wanted. It is all icing on the cake as of now. That's contentment, isn't it?