SHARED SPACES, UNEXPECTED SOURCES

Bowdin Davis, Jr.
Maryland Institute College of Art

This paper was presented this year (2002) at the Sixteenth Annual National Conference on Liberal Arts and the Education of Artists, held by the School of Visual Arts in New York. The thematic heading for this conference was Art Remembers, while this paper was positioned within the category Borrowings: The Common Alphabet. This paper points out links between commercial exhibition spaces and the spaces Marcel Duchamp’s pieces establish in a post-1912 world. My concerns with Duchamp here are partially dependent on research that led to my book (2002) Duchamp: Domestic Patterns, Covers, and Threads, though the concerns there are differently focused.

Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) is well known for his Readymades, a category of art that applies either to his found objects or to those that he has modified. While Duchamp has, by his Readymade, presented a variant on the conventional hand-made artifact, his real contribution may lie in his changing the framework within which the artifact is perceived. Exemplary of these Readymades are Duchamp’s 1913 Bicycle Wheel (original 1913) (Fig. 1) and a suspended snow-shovel (original 1913) (Fig. 2) seemingly titled with some anticipation, In Advance of the Broken Arm.

Most of the objects that Duchamp presents as being readymade presuppose their manufacture in workshops or factories, and in this, these pieces all lead us unsuspecting, away from the conventions within which we once viewed art. Duchamp’s Readymades were proffered us within the art environment; the objects themselves enable us to envision a surround different from the art gallery. Rather than Duchamp only creating and displaying just the objects we see as art, he also dragged with him much of the Twentieth Century, protesting, but buying his and the descendants of his Readymades. It is the Readymade object which has evoked not only the factory as it emerged from the industrial revolution of the Eighteenth Century, but as well, the display space that each type of object carries with it, a space which is a function of the object’s originally intended use, reason for manufacture, or even how it is promoted for sale. While it is both the object and its framework that Duchamp presents to us for reconsideration, it is the recontextualization that has wrought the most havoc upon the conventions that were presumed to surround art and art-making.

When Duchamp unsuccessfully attempted to enter Fountain (a men’s urinal placed on a stand, its back face-down) (Fig. 3), in a 1917 exhibition in New York held by the Society of Independent Artists, he was trying to place an object belonging to the domain of plumbing in a space whose framework had been delimited by the conventions of artistic display; these were the art gallery itself, and inside, the objects which were made to be exhibited in such a venue. What made Fountain or many other Duchamp pieces problematic was the set of expectations viewers brought to it. Beginning with Duchamp, we could no longer assume that an object displayed in an art space was exhibited in the space to which the object originally belonged.
However, when an artist placed the object in that art exhibition space, the mere gesture of inserting it in that space labeled the object as something that had to be considered as belonging there. The result is that the piece took on the persona of a work of art, merely due to the display space in which it was shown. Remember, we once assumed that the space of the exhibition was the one in which the object belonged. Perhaps it did, but in Duchamp’s case, the object carried with itself the associations it had with spaces in which it was manufactured and/or then put to use. When we place these objects within the space of the art gallery, we modify the function of the art gallery; the gallery space became partially or almost entirely conflated with the modern exhibition space during the Twentieth Century.

In this process we have recognized the art gallery/museum for what it is, a commercial space; both the display space and the objects that inhabit this space increasingly become an extension of the commercial world.

In 1987, Barbara Kruger’s photo silkscreen on vinyl, Untitled (I Shop Therefore I Am) (Fig. 4), first screamed its now-twisted Cartesian “I think therefore I am” at us in terms of contemporary consumer habits. It is an “in our face” insistence on the presence of the world of commerce. Instead of thinking, we impulse-buy and do so with the vehemence afforded us by the credit card, suggested by Kruger’s red card and its message in white letters which reads: “I Shop, Therefore I am.” It is this assertion which has its roots in the industrial revolution that emerged in the Eighteenth Century. The fusion of art and consumer-related images was to emerge clearly with the 1851 construction of the Crystal Palace in London’s Hyde Park (Fig. 5). Unbeknownst to the generation of 1851 was the “credit card” referenced in Kruger’s piece, even though the commercialism which has emerged since the mid-Nineteenth Century has become part of some of the statements that artists have made in the latter part of the Twentieth Century, and which they continue to make in our time.

The Crystal Palace, which housed London’s great exhibition of 1851, provides an exemplar for the exhibition practices of many future international expositions. Successors to this London exhibition of 1851 would trade upon its breadth and focus; amongst later exhibitions then, there is one in particular that we need to examine for it will more-directly presage the role the manufactured object would come to have within the context of art. This would be the large trade exhibition of 1912 held in Munich, the Bavarian trade fair known as the Bayrische Gewerbeschau.

As travelers emerged from the Munich train station in 1912, they were greeted by a signpost (Fig. 6) bearing the initial letters “BGS” of the Bayrische Gewerbeschau at the top, and the circle-enclosed emblems of the eight Bavarian districts as they were under King Leopold. Near its base was a prominent sign; this told travelers not only that the show lasted from May to October but also directed them to the exhibition grounds within Munich. The Gewerbeschau was a trade exhibition though it included as well a mix of examples from the fine and applied arts.

Inside this trade fair, in addition to machinery and pottery, were displays of many kinds of arts, from puppets made by Steiff (Fig. 7) to rooms containing religious icons (Fig. 8).
We need to acknowledge that there had been other large trade fairs since the 1851 Exhibition in London; two international ones were held in Paris in 1889 and 1900. As will become apparent, however, the 1912 Munich trade fair has more significance than we may have previously considered. Local advertisements, not only in newspapers, but on street signs as well, spread word of its presence; such notice could hardly have eluded visitors or for that matter, the residents of Munich.

It is even more significant that the French artist Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) had arrived in Munich in June of 1912; he was to spend two months there. Duchamp had ample opportunity to wander around Munich and the Gewerbeschau was a major attraction that year.

Exhibitions as comprehensive in scope as the 1912 Munich Gewerbeschau provided huge spaces for the display of products from an increasingly industrialized world.

The interior of Hall I (Fig. 9) was planned with a center aisle, with exhibition spaces to either side, and a view of the hall (Fig. 10) leads us past these exhibition spaces and draws our attention to the large circular image of Bavaria personified.

Hall II (Fig. 11) by Richard Riemerschmid at the 1912 Munich Gewerbeschau is shown here as well, and it too contained displays similar to those found in Hall I. The exhibition contained articles and machines made to appeal to the interest and demands of consumers from a growing middle class.

A multitude of displays contained objects both from industry and home manufacture. These objects were produced by skilled craftspeople and artists, and their exhibits existed almost side-by-side within the 1912 Munich Gewerbeschau. Could Marcel Duchamp have seen the 1912 Munich Gewerbeschau?

To answer this question, one first needs to return to the mid-Nineteenth Century for the prototype of this exhibition in Munich. The chromolithograph (Fig. 5) depicts products of British manufacture within the Crystal Palace at the 1851 International Exhibition held in London’s Hyde Park. In the left foreground of this image (Fig. 12) one sees visitors whose presence is graced by portrait busts, both human and equine. Directly behind these displays is a huge multifaceted lighthouse lamp. The products of industry (the new technology) and the arts are enmeshed together in display as though they had forever been depicted this way. Successors to this exhibition would continue such associations. Significantly, in this exhibition, for the first time, the arts and manufactured goods of many nations were displayed in one venue at what, by the end of the Nineteenth Century, would become routinely known as a trade fair. Held primarily within Joseph Paxton’s modular cast-iron and glass structure, this exhibition became the forerunner of international trade fairs where objects of all kinds were exhibited; sometimes they occupied the same space, while at others they were in adjacent but contiguous structures. This mid-Nineteenth Century commercial venture, designed to attract both exhibitors as well as consumers from all countries, set the precedent for successive
national and international exhibitions. These fairs were to provide a meeting place both for fine arts as well as for crafts manufactured either in home settings or commercial establishments. Such exhibitions, and in the Munich of 1912, the Bayrische Gewerbeschau was one of these, provided huge spaces for the display of articles and machine products from an increasingly industrialized world. Thus, in the Munich 1912 fair, a multitude of displays, both from industry and home manufacture, as well as from skilled craftspeople and artists, existed side-by-side (Figs. 8, 10).

Exemplary of this are the adjacent exhibition rooms in the main hall; many objects could be displayed almost side by side in a large hall. Just as easily, objects from many manufacturers could appear in a single room as is seen in this photograph of an exhibition room displaying the books published by Bavarian publishing houses or sold by other book dealers (Fig. 13). All of this is part of the Munich Gewerbeschau.

An article by Duchamp scholar Thierry de Duve suggests explanations as to why Duchamp’s art changed so dramatically after his 1912 summer visit to Munich. de Duve says:  

Our hypothesis is that this constellation of differences between Paris and Munich was in itself capable both of displacing the questions that Duchamp posed to himself about his practice and of leading to new questions even if he was not yet aware of them.

de Duve suggests that while in Munich, Duchamp could have become aware of the Gewerbeschau in some manner, and that “[f]rom May to October 1912 Munich was the site of a gigantic ‘industrial exposition.’ Or should we say an exhibition of ‘industrial art’?’ We have been left to conjecture: de Duve concluded, even-handedly, that Duchamp “visited, or did not visit” the 1912 Gewerbeschau. I find it difficult to remain in the realm of conjecture, given the work Duchamp did while in Munich, although de Duve gingerly suggests that the Gewerbeschau must have had “reverberations” which Duchamp could not have helped but notice during that summer of 1912. One needs to look at this trade exhibition, the 1912 Munich Bayrische Gewerbeschau, as essential to Duchamp’s revelations that almost any object, and not just objects made to be “art,” could serve as art, and that in doing so, these objects changed the nature of the space in which art is exhibited. The mix of object types in the nearly adjacent spaces provided by the exhibitions at the 1912 Gewerbeschau was revelatory to Duchamp, for it offered him a new paradigm in which the rarefied atmosphere of the gallery exhibition of “Fine Arts” was replaced by the commingling of objects of all types. The commerce, in objects of the sort such as that which might be found in an open-air bazaar, under the rubric of the Bayrische Gewerbeschau, had finally, and for Duchamp, suddenly supplanted the traditional conventions of how art could be exhibited and what it might be. The Gewerbeschau offered through the mix of exhibits from a multitude
of venues, some exemplars for what eventually would transmute into Duchamp’s Readymades.

The Gewerbeschau also contained clues which I believe are important for Duchamp’s major early piece, The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even and also known as The Large Glass (1915-1923) (Fig. 14). A look both at Duchamp’s 1912 Munich work as well as that which followed its direction makes it difficult to believe that Duchamp was not in attendance at the 1912 Gewerbeschau.

The May 9th 1912 issue of Die Illustrirte Zeitung, a newspaper widely published in the cities of Leipzig, Berlin, Vienna and Budapest, contains a full-page drawing (Fig. 15) by Ferdinand Spiegel with the header “Der Zug der Volker” (The Way of the People), while beneath, the caption reads: Zur Bayrischen Gewerbeschau 1912 in München, Mai_Oktober (to the Bavarian Trade Exhibition, 1912, in Munich, May-October). Young and old, heavy or svelte, nattily or exotically attired, children, adults and dog alike; are all shown moving towards a banner at left emblazoned with the initials “BGS” of the just-opened equivalent of an international exposition, the Bayrische Gewerbeschau. The depicted magnetism of the trade exhibition almost portends the attraction which the large shopping mall still has for people in the early Twenty-First Century: Consumerism was alive and well in 1912.

The halls of the 1912 Munich Gewerbeschau, d(Fig. 11)as in the case of the 1851 Crystal Palace in London’s Hyde Park (Fig. 5), were temporary, designed for a focus on the exhibitors, and in many places were constructed of materials such as cloth or paper, both of which are still used today in the short-lived window displays in major chain stores in the United States and Europe. Designed by Richard Riemerschmid, an architect from the Munich suburb of Passing, the main exhibition room, Hall I (Fig. 10) of the Munich Gewerbeschau was a huge temporary space, its lower left and right areas crowded with displays by exhibitors of machines, machine-produced artifacts, handwork of all sorts, and even artifacts from home-based industries. Traditional art and the results of industrial production were joined not only under one roof but also within the entire exhibition. This exhibition, through Marcel Duchamp and his Readymades, has affected much of the art of the rest of the Twentieth Century.

In the June 20th 1912 issue of the Die Illustrierte Zeitung appeared an article titled Moderne Ausstellungstechnik (auf Grund der Bayrischen Gewerbeschau München 1912) (Modern Exhibition Techniques on the Grounds of the Bavarian Gewerbeschau, Munich, 1912). It is here that the purpose of the Gewerbeschau is laid out. Roughly translated, it reads in part:19

What is new and worth mentioning is that beyond the exhibition are several accompanying manifestations. There you can watch the making of many things you use daily. You never really know how these things are made. In our times the manufacture of things, at least in larger cities, is withdrawn into inaccessible factories. But how can somebody judge
whether a thing is good or bad, full of quality or meaning, if one doesn’t know how it is made? From such thoughts came the idea to show visitors to the Gewerbeschau (trade fair) how blacksmiths and locksmiths, cobblers and box-makers, pottery [Fig. 16] and glass-blowers, glove-makers and straw-hat weavers, medal stampers and fabric-weavers, book- and lithograph pressers, cabinet-makers and basket-weavers all executed their work, how they brought their piece of work from a raw product to the piece shown in the exhibition, how they promoted it. The way this is done opens a new route to the future on one hand, as much as it takes you back to the memories of how your ancestors produced things. Who were these ancestors, who worked under other material conditions and who could work with much more peace and quiet? Such exquisite examples of pieces with the older craftsmanship, done with especially high standards, are shown for comparison and inspiration next to the products of our times. They are taken out of their stiff existence in museums and brought into the fresh vibrant life of our day. They are fulfilling, on every part, the very mission that is the leitmotif of the Gewerbeschau: To represent and elevate the good taste both amongst the producers and consumers. (Emphasis added.)

Already then in this early 1912 promotional article for the Gewerbeschau, the connection between the making of old and new is made while its purpose is clearly a concern with maintaining the quality of yesteryear’s products in those produced in the Bavaria of 1912. The way to do this was to show older craftsmanship side-by-side with the articles then being produced. Whether or not Marcel Duchamp read all of the material attendant to the exhibition, the mixture of artifacts from such different venues and with such different forms of manufacture must have made an impression upon him. It was not long after he returned to Paris that he produced his first Readymade.

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NOTES

3. Before 1945, Bavaria was composed of eight Regierungs-Bezirke (districts) whose district shields are shown, (Figure 6), left to right, beginning at the top: (1) Oberbayern, (2) Niederbayern, (3) Pfalz, (4) Oberpfalz, (5) Oberfranken, (6) Mittelfranken, (7) Unterfranken, (8) Schwaben and Neuberg, with its capital at Münich.
4. Tomkins, p. 93.
7. de Duve, p. 59
Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) is not a household name in the West as is the name of his contemporary, Mahatma Gandhi, but in India many hold him in equally high regard. Tagore was first and foremost a prolific writer. He produced poetry, plays, short stories, novels, essays, letters, lectures, and a profusion of miscellaneous writings. He was also an innovative educator, a popular and well-traveled lecturer, a beloved composer of over 2000 songs, and late in life a painter. He was considered a leading nationalist in India’s struggle for independence from British rule. But he was a nationalist who was strongly against any form of nationalism or militarism that pitted one nation against another. He was considered by many Indians to be a national treasure and a primary voice of Indian culture and heritage. He was also an adamant proponent of fusing the best of the East and West to create harmony in what he saw as the inevitable merger of cultures coming in the future. His visionary stance on this matter made him a controversial figure in some Indian circles.

Tagore came to the attention of the West in 1911 when a slim volume of his poetry was published in England. He did the translation from his native Bengali to English, and a heart-felt introduction was written by W. B. Yeats. The book was titled Gitanjali (Song Offerings). It is a series of 103 short poems that explore the human search for the spiritual. The depth of beauty and insight in the poetry took the West by storm and in 1913 he became the first non-European to be awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. His fame was fortified by more publications and in 1915 he was given a knighthood by the British. He returned that honor in 1919 to protest the Amritsar Massacre where 50 British soldiers opened fire on 10,000 unarmed Indian men, women and children, killing 400 and wounding 1200.

The complexity and quantity of Tagore’s contributions to humanity are compiled in 29 large volumes that contain his written words and the numerous biographies that have attempted to document his life. In this essay I would like to focus on some of his perceptions on aesthetics – his vision of beauty and truth. As we move into the technology dominated 21st Century, I feel the deep humanity of Tagore’s perceptiveness and wisdom has much to offer us.

I would like to focus on one particular lecture he gave at the University of Dacca in 1926. It was refined into written form under the title of The Religion of an Artist in 1936. This remarkable statement on aesthetics was produced late in his life, five years before his death at the age of 80. It expresses the purity of his search for beauty and truth and also his sharp, critical analysis of modernist aesthetics.

In the lecture Tagore says:

That fact that we exist has its truth in the fact that everything else does exist, and the “I am” in me crosses it finitude whenever it deeply realizes itself in the
“Thou art.” This crossing of the limit produces joy, the joy that we have in beauty, in love, in greatness. Self-forgetting, and in a higher degree, self-sacrifice, is our acknowledgement of the infinite. This is the philosophy that explains our joy in all arts, the arts that in their creation intensify the sense of unity which is the unity of truth we carry within ourselves. The principle of unity which it contains is more or less perfectly satisfied in a beautiful face or a picture, a poem, a song, a character or a harmony of interrelated ideas or facts and then for it these things become intensely real, and therefore joyful.

Tagore is expounding the essence of beauty and truth as found in the permeating principle of unity. A unity that can only be truly understood when we are able to transcend the singularity of the self and see the deep unbreakable unity of all creation. In that realization is not only truth and beauty but also innate joy of understanding—of awakening.

Later in lecture he continues:

In perfect rhythm, the art form becomes like the stars which in their seeming stillness are never still, like a motionless flame that is nothing but movement. A great picture is always speaking, but news from a newspaper, even of some tragic event, is stillborn. Some news may be a mere commonplace in the obscurity of a journal, but give it a proper rhythm and it will never cease to shine. That is art. It has the magic wand which gives undying reality to all things it touches, and relates them to the personal being in us. We stand before its productions and say: I know you as I know myself, you are real….

This observation of the power of unity and rhythm to tie itself to the unity that exists within us explains not only our joy and attachment to great works of art but also our acquiescence and subordination to the world of advertising that has used some of the most creative artistic minds of the 20th century.

Tagore continues:

This sensitiveness to the touch of things, such abundant delight in the recognition of them, is obstructed when insistent purposes become innumerable and intricate in our society, when problems crowd in on our path clamoring for our attention, and life’s movement is impeded with things and thoughts too difficult for a harmonious assimilation.

This has been growing evident every day in the modern age, which gives more time to the acquisition of life’s equipment that to the enjoyment of it. In fact, life itself is made secondary to life’s materials, even like a garden buried under the bricks gathered for the garden wall. Somehow the mania for bricks and mortar grows, the kingdom of rubbish dominates, the days of spring are made futile and the flowers never come.

Our modern mind, a hasty tourist in its rush over the miscellaneous, ransacks cheap markets
of curios which mostly are delusions. This happens because its natural sensibility for simple aspects of existence is dulled by constant preoccupations that divert it. The literature that it produces seems always to be poking her nose into out-of-the-way places for things and effects that are out of the common. She racks her resources in order to be striking. She elaborates inconstant changes in style, as in modern millinery, and the product suggests more the polish of steel that the bloom of life.

Fashions in literature that rapidly tire of themselves seldom come from the depth. They belong to the frothy rush of the surface, with it boisterous clamor for recognition of the moment…. Its expressions are often grimaces, like the cactus of the desert which lacks modesty in its distortions and peace in its thorns, in whose attitude an aggressive discourtesy bristles up suggesting a forced pride of poverty. We often come across its analogy in some of the modern writings which are difficult to ignore because of their prickly surprises and paradoxical gesticulations. Wisdom is not rare in these works, but it is a wisdom that has lost confidence in its serene dignity, afraid of being ignored by crowds which are attracted by the extravagant and the unusual. It is sad to see wisdom struggling to be clever, a prophet arrayed in caps and bells before an admiring multitude.

While Tagore is referring to literature every comment rings true when applied to the visual arts, and it seems the comments are even more relevant to the post-modern era than to the modern era in which he was writing. His observation on our headlong rush to accumulate rather than experience forms the basis on how our innate sense of unity has been buried under a pile of vacuous titillations that make up much post-modern art and entertainment. The proponents of this art often site the reflection of reality and culture as their justification. Tagore has a response for them:

It has often been said by its advocates that this show of rudely loud and cheaply lurid in art has its justification in the unbiased recognition of facts as such; and according to them realism must not be shunned even if it be ragged and evil-smelling. But when it does not concern science but concerns the arts we must draw a distinction between realism and reality. In its own wide perspective of normal environment, disease is a reality which has to be acknowledged in literature. But disease in a hospital is realism fit for the use of science. It is an abstraction which if allowed to haunt literature, may assume a startling appearance because of its unreality. Such vagrant specters do not have a proper modulation in a normal surrounding; and they offer false proportions in their features because the proportion of their environment is tampered with. Such a curtailment of the essential is not art, but a trick which exploits mutilation in order to assert a false claim to reality. Unfortunately men are not rare who believe that what forcibly startles them allows them to see more than the facts which are balanced and restrained, which they have to woo and win. Very likely, owing to the lack of leisure, such persons are growing in numbers, and the dark cellars of sex-psychology and drugstores of moral virulence are burgled to give them the stimulus which they wish to believe to be the stimulus of aesthetic reality.

There can be no doubt that many in the art world and many more in popular culture have
been duped into believing in the unreality produced by the out-of-context use of the violent, ugly and sensational. There can be no doubt that the violent, ugly and sensational do exist in our culture—and globally—they are real. But the supremacy and prominence of which they are portrayed is tremendously unrealistic. By making them the leading aesthetic of our culture we condemn ourselves to their dominance. It is difficult in an age where reality has been so distorted by emphasis on the adrenaline-stimulating dark and the abnormal to even know that the unity and harmony can exist for us, but it does exist and it is the true reality.

Tagore concludes the lecture with the following words:

It is for the artist to remind the world that with the truth of our expression we grow in truth. When the man-made world is less an expression of man’s creative soul than a mechanical device for some purpose of power, then it hardens itself, acquiring proficiency at the cost of the subtle suggestiveness of living growth. In his creative activities man makes nature one with his own life and love. But with his utilitarian energies he fights nature, banishes her from his world, deforms and defiles her with the ugliness of his ambitions.

The world of man’s of manufacture, with its discordant shrieks and swagger, impresses on him the scheme of a universe which has no touch of the person and therefore no ultimate significance. All the great civilizations that have become extinct must have come to their end through such wrong expression of humanity; through parasitism on a gigantic scale bred by wealth, by man’s clinging reliance on material resources; through a scoffing spirit of denial, of negation, robbing us of our means of sustenance in the path of the truth.

It is for the artist to proclaim his faith in the everlasting Yes—to say: “I believe that there is an ideal hovering over and permeating the earth, an ideal of that paradise which is not the mere outcome of fancy, but the ultimate reality in which all things dwell and move.”

I believe that the vision of paradise is to be seen in the sunlight and the green of the earth, in the beauty of the human face and the wealth of human life, even in objects that are seemingly insignificant and unprepossessing. Everywhere in this earth the spirit of paradise is awake and sending forth its voice. It reaches our inner ear without our knowing it. It tunes our harp of life which sends our aspiration in music beyond the finite, not only in prayers and hopes, but also in temples which are flames of fire in stone, in pictures that are dreams made everlasting, in the dance which is ecstatic meditation in the still center of movement.

In a time where negativism, nihilism, and pessimism dominate, Tagore’s call for us to open our eyes to the paradise of unity and harmony that surround may sound either naïve or visionary. For me it is a visionary call. A call that asks us to rise above the chaotic discord of the piles of rubbish we have heaped around us and find the beauty that is at the center of existence -- the ultimate unity of which we are an indispensable part. For an artist reared, educated, and matured in the frenzied variety of the postmodern world to find the quiet unity of the center may seem an unreachable task, but once again, Tagore shows us a way—the way of an artist.
Let me conclude with two poems from Tagore’s Gitanjali.

Gitanjali LXIX

The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures.

It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers. It is the same life that is rocked in ocean-cradle of birth and death, in ebb and in flow.

I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of life. And my pride is from the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood this moment.

And, Gitanjali XX

On the day when the lotus bloomed, alas, my mind was straying, and I knew it not. My basket was empty and the flower remained unheeded.

Only now and again sadness fell upon me, and I started up from my dream and felt a sweet trace of a strange fragrance in the south wind.

That vague sweetness made my heart ache with longing and it seemed to me that it was the eager breath of the summer seeking its completion.

I knew not then that it was so near, that it was mine, and that this perfect sweetness had blossomed in the depth of my own heart.

We in the arts have the “magic wand” that Tagore earlier referred to. We have the ability and responsibility to use that wand to illuminate the truth, or we can, as so many have in recent decades, use the wand exploit the underbelly of our culture. It is up to the individual whether they wish to remain in the muck and mud of the lotus roots or rise to transcendent beauty and glory of the blossom.

It may be said of Tagore that he was ahead of his time, but I don’t believe that is true. He was most certainly a man of his time but also a man who is timeless. His work would ring as true and beautiful if it was written in 500B.C., 1200A.D., 1912, 2002 or 2102.

The lecture, “The Religion of an Artist,” may be found in its entirety in The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume 3, pp. 683-697, Sahitya Akademi, New Dehli, 1996. The second part of the lecture, where the above quotes are found, is also published under the title, “The Religion of an Artist,” in A Tagore Reader, pp. 230-240, Beacon Press, Boston, 1961.
Gitanjali is available from numerous publishers including a $1.50 volume from Dover Thrift Editions or a $1500.00 handmade artist’s book available in the spring of 2003 from me.