

The four meanings of Inspiration

By Ven. Piyasilo

FOR some months now, I have been enjoying the literary section of the *New Straits Times*, especially the writings of Salleh Ben Joned, Wong Phui Nam, Lim Chee Seng, Otto Steinmayer, and I look forward to every Wednesday edition of the paper.

Reading their articles has become a sort of continuing education for my interest in art, literature, poetry and the expression of the human spirit.

Not only have I cut out those pages and kept them for constant reference, but the privilege of tasting their poetic minds (or should I say hearts) has never failed to be a catalyst, an inspiration, to my own mind-heart, now that I have completed a volume of 'protest poems', an anthology I have called *Life Reversed* (1991).

I especially miss Salleh Ben Joned's contributions, 'or his piquant candour and courage, and would like to dedicate this reflection on Inspiration to him.

No true poetry is without inspiration; indeed, inspiration is the life-blood of all creative work: music, painting, drama, and so on. Inspiration is the force behind the truth and beauty expressed, all of which constitute creativity.

There are four meanings of the word 'inspiration': the physical, the religious, the social, and the aesthetic. In its *physical* sense, 'inspiration' literally means 'inspiring', from the Latin *in-* + *spirare* (to breathe), from which we get the noun *spiritus* (meaning spirit, breath). Specifically, inspiration means 'in-breath' (Sanskrit/Pali *ana*), while expiration is 'out-breath' (Sanskrit/Pali *apana*).

Being mindful of one's in-breath and out-breath (*ana-pana.sati*) leads to mental cultivation and concentration leading to the experience of higher levels of gradually more refined consciousness known as 'mental absorption'.

This is not only the experience of profound mental calm: it is the height of creative ecstasy. If art is taken in the aesthetic sense — as the expression and experience of beauty — then, this is where art and religion merge or at least cross paths.

Art has been defined as anything man-made: a piece of driftwood, beautiful as it may appear, is a work of nature, not art. But if one made an object identical or similar to the driftwood, it is art. Some philosophers, however, argue that the natural driftwood should be re-

garded as art if the artist (or anyone for that matter) *perceives* it as beautiful.

Inspiration, in other words, is an experience of beauty. In ancient Indian terminology, the beautiful is called *subha*, which also means purity (in the inner and non-ritual sense). In the early Pali texts, the term *subha* means shining, bright, beautiful, auspicious, lucky, pleasant, good.

What distinguishes a work of art from the commonplace?

A work of art is, first and foremost, a piece of work; it is human-made. It is precious because it is rare, even unique. Not everyone could paint another Mona Lisa; even if one could, it would not be as valuable for it has already been done.

Another factor is change. Life is change. Human tastes change. Art tries to preserve a kind of window of permanence through which we could view a wholeness, or at least some of it, as experienced by the artist.

The world as it is is unsatisfactory and incomplete. Art, as it were, completes it for a brief moment at least. It gives us a powerful vision of what things can be. If life were satisfactory, there would be no need for art.

Art is a human need without which one is but an empty pictureless frame of reason. Indeed, art is the natural expression of life's conflicts seeking to resolve themselves.

The most important characteristic of art that inspires is that it is ego-less and selfless. We see the painting but not the painter; we hear the music but the musician is dead; we enjoy the poetry of a poet of a bygone age. The work of art on the wall belongs to the seer who could feel it; for then he carries it forever with him. A work of art, in other words, is a trigger for noble emotions.

Suppose that an art lover were to regard Leonardo da Vinci's 'Mona Lisa' as being impermanent (some of the paintwork is cracking), it would then make him feel unsatisfied about it. Feeling that he has no control over change and unsatisfactoriness, he realises that there is no self, no real owner, behind the painting or the painter or the art lover: it is his own perception of beauty that makes the Mona Lisa what it is.

If the same picture causes the observer to have sensual lust, then it is pornography, that is, pornography in the beholder's eyes.

By the same token, one can say that a sensual (or pornographic) object could, with skilful consideration,

be desensualised. If a lustful teenager sees an attractive naked female, he would naturally be sensually aroused; but a surgeon operating on the same female would be more likely to be wholesomely mindful of the body.

Here, to be 'sensually aroused' means to have the desire to acquire and enjoy an object, and to go on enjoying it in a possessive (albeit externally composed) manner. This process is initiated by a single thought-moment: a thought is all it takes. However, with skilful consideration, that one unwholesome thought would not be able to take control of one.

While beauty is the quest of art, religion uses both beauty and ugliness (and plainness) as tools of spiritual liberation. In skilfully considering what is ugly or plain as bearing the Three Characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and nonselfhood, it becomes 'beautiful', in the sense of being 'good' by way of bringing one closer to the true nature of life.

Beauty, in other words, has a purpose, and that purpose is spiritual liberation. It is a wholesome choice we must ourselves make.

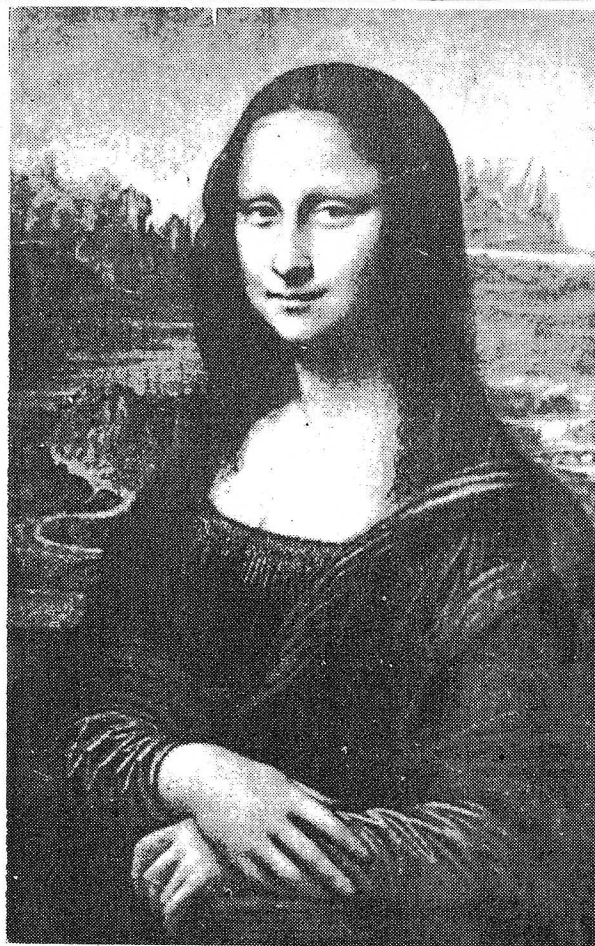
In theistic religions, inspiration refers to the experience of a possession by the divine or sacred power that enables the inspired person to see and communicate supernatural truth. The Delphic oracle of the ancient Greeks and the tribal shaman were believed to have had insight into the future and into sacred mysteries.

Among the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), inspiration is mainly connected with their respective sacred scriptures. As such, they have often been referred to as the "religions of the book".

For charismatic religions, that is, those centring around hallowed individuals rather than scripture, inspiration is regarded as a divine influence that qualifies them to receive and communicate sacred revelations and which endows them with certain miraculous powers, e.g. healing.

With regard to the social meaning of inspiration, I would like to apply the Weberian analysis of the three primary roots of religion — the ascetic, the mystical and the prophetic — on a more universal scale, embracing both the religious and secular dimensions.

On the ascetic level, one becomes socially engaged by being motivated by the belief that salvation, or at least relief from suffering, entails some form of renun-



The viewer's perception of beauty is that which makes the *Mona Lisa* what it is

ciation or withdrawal from the 'world', from social and psychological ties with the family, from all creaturely interests (Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, 1963).

One with *ascetic experience* believes that with withdrawal and self-mastery comes liberation from suffering. Socially-engaged asceticism is the conviction that self-development should come before people helping, or at least while helping others one should not neglect one's own spiritual development.

Social engagement inspired by the mystical experience entails a contemplative way of life where one renounces mundane interest but accepts the world around one with humility and compassion. The socially-engaged mystic not only sees all life as one, but is guided by the vision of a better world and life to come. The mystic's main interest is the quest for wisdom and the dispensation of that wisdom to society.

The third motivation for social engagement is the prophetic experience, that is, the belief that one is serving as an agent for a challenge to an unsatisfactory, even evil, social order. Such an action is guided by a vision of ultimate standards or a higher purpose. The socially-engaged prophet, through his own exemplary life, is concerned with ethics and justice.

From the aesthetic angle, inspiration is regarded as the act or power of moving the intellect or emotions. In Western literature, this is gained through the invocation of the Muses in classical Greek and Latin epics.

The word *aesthetics* was coined by Alexander Baumgarten and first appeared in his *Reflections on Poetry* (1735). He was a follower of the Rationalistic school of philosophy under the influence of Rene Descartes (the father of modern Western philosophy) and the German Gottfried Leibniz.

Baumgarten observed that Descartes' distinction of "clear and distinct ideas" restricted cognition to conceptual knowledge (i.e. involving only the mind), and thereby excluded sensory and perceptual cognition (found in poetry and the other arts). Drawing upon the Greek word for perception (*aisthesis*), he coined the term 'aesthetics', by which he meant the science of perceptual cognition.

According to Baumgarten, the greater the perceptual clarity achieved in a poem, the greater is its poetic perfection. In simple terms, a good poem or a true work of art is one that immediately and effectively conveys an experience of beauty to one's senses (seeing, hearing, etc), which is mentally felt, raising at least momentarily the quality of one's life.