

The Return of Aquarius

Mary's seven-panel mural of *The Return of Aquarius* hangs in the Mary Holmes Fireside Lounge at Cowell College, University of California at Santa Cruz. It was completed in 1974.

Look at the pictures first, always remembering Mary's dictum that the greater the work of art, the worse the reproduction. The mural reads from right to left. Then read the commentaries. Then look at the pictures again.

Right-hand Panels:



Central Panels:



Left-hand Panels:



When most people read or hear the word *myth*, they think of it as the antithesis of the word *fact*. “The myth is . . . , but the fact is . . .” This is so ingrained an idea that we confront any traditional myth from any culture with skepticism. Is it true that Daphne, chased by Apollo, was turned into a tree? that God split the Red Sea for the Children of Israel? that Jesus was resurrected from the dead? that when the sleeping Vishnu breathes out the universe is created and when he breathes in it is destroyed? that Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree for forty-nine days without moving? that George Washington never told a lie? No, we say (unless we are believers)—that’s a myth. And we bolster our skepticism with arguments: human beings can’t become trees; the Red Sea must have been split, if it was split at all, by some tidal phenomenon; someone probably stole Jesus’ body from the tomb; we have no evidence that the universe is the exhalation of a sleeping god; nobody can sit under a tree without moving for that long; nobody gets through life without telling a lie.

I include sacred stories with profane here for two reasons. The first is that we cannot always be sure we know the difference between stories arising from the unaided human imagination and those arising from divine revelation: can we be certain when the divine is using the human imagination as its vehicle and when not? The second reason is that most modern people are disposed to seeing both sacred and profane myth under the overarching rule of the rational intellect, which attempts to banish from reality the very possibility of divine revelation. By the rational intellect we are permitted only one question: “Is it really true, or is it just a metaphor?” That question itself abolishes the distinction between revelation and folklore. It is prejudicial in itself, and the more so because of the word “just.” To paraphrase C.S. Lewis in *The Abolition of Man*, the question does not propose a legitimate philosophical distinction but expresses a hidden assumption, and few in our time are able to resist the implication of that word “just.” “Just a metaphor” implies that it isn’t really true, because it can’t be proven empirically to be factual. Modern people contemplating the splitting of the Red Sea or the resurrection of Jesus or the enlightenment of Gautama Siddhartha are often reduced to asking “did it really happen?” The implication is that if it did really happen, then we can believe in its meaning. If it didn’t then we can’t, and the authority of the story dissolves with its authenticity. This approach binds us into the narrowness of the “fact or myth” attitude.

But let’s look at it another way. First of all, the question whether it really happened or not is unanswerable. It pursues an illusion. Can we go back in time and track on the calendar Buddha’s patience under the Bodhi tree? or observe with our measuring devices the splitting of the Red Sea? or watch with our eyes as Jesus steps (as in Piero della Francesca’s painting) or explodes (as in Grunewald’s painting) out of the tomb? (Piero and Grunewald painted it precisely because they could *not* go back to see it for themselves.) We can have no access to the meaning of those events by trying to discern their material factuality. And since we can’t know them in this way, trying to do so leads to a dead end. But let us suppose that the divine will really did cause these miraculous events to happen. *Why* did it? Not only to bring the children of Israel out of Egypt and Jesus up into heaven and Buddha out of suffering but also to cause the events to be written in a book, to be passed down from generation to generation, so that all through time we may re-experience the meaning of those events in the stories of them: namely that God, not man, rules nature and history; that the soul does not die; that suffering can be escaped. These stories exist to dramatize not merely the facts they report but the spiritual reality behind them:

the perennial possibility and promise of redemption from the limitations of nature, history, and death.

In modern times, despite the promise of the sacred stories, we tend to think that the only true things are material facts and that in order to live and be well we must embrace material facts and reject as lies the myths of the benighted old past. We are told that myths are the ignorant attempts of people in the past to explain things that we can now explain by science. We all generally think that. Get real, we say to the believers in myth, whom we call sentimentalists or fundamentalists or dreamers. We know better. We demand facts, reject myths, are free of delusion, address reality as it is. Evidence for the dethronement of myth is their reduction to silliness in cartoons, films, and advertising, so that the God of the Bible can be played by George Burns (*Oh, God!*) and the life of Christ can be made a Monty Python joke (*The Life of Brian*).

But clichés, says Mary, stick around because they are true. Reductive reference to the clichés derived from myths is also evidence of the myths' staying power. The only way these silly movies can have any meaning is that the myths behind them still matter. We couldn't enjoy the satirical versions if we didn't already know and care about the older ones. It turns out that the idea that myth is the opposite of reality, that myths are discredited attempts to explain what now can be explained by science, is erroneous. For those who can receive the myths, their truths are every bit as empirically real as any material fact. For those who cannot—or cannot yet—the rejection of the meaning and reality of myth in the name of material fact results in an extreme impoverishment of our intellectual, emotional, and spiritual lives.

What Mary taught, by contrast, and what she makes explicit in the recorded lecture she gave on these paintings, is that the great myths carry profound truths in a way that the fact/myth or fact/fantasy or fact/lie antithesis does not acknowledge. Myth was never meant to explain phenomena as science means to explain them. Rather the mythic story is the only way we human beings have to communicate effectively about the realities of the inner life, the life of the emotions, the life of the spirit, which is impossible to communicate in words. Words are too narrow, too particular, to convey the subtleties and complexities of our inner experience. When something significant happens to you—good or bad—and someone asks “how are you feeling about this?” your answer will be something like “fine,” or “good,” or “unhappy,” or “disappointed,” or another word equally limited. Or your response can turn into a great long disquisition that, after many minutes of words, still doesn't come near the reality of what you have just experienced within yourself. But if you have access to a great myth, to which your questioner also has access, you can say “I feel like Sisyphus,” or “like Judas,” or “like Odysseus returning to Ithaca,” or “like Jacob after wrestling with the angel,” and the listener knows more precisely the essence of what you are experiencing in your inner life than any other words could convey. For those who know the story of the myth, its mere mention gives form and reality to the feeling. In fact it reveals to us the *meaning* of the feeling. You can psychoanalyze a person for years and never approach a diagnosis as completely as you can by saying “he is a narcissist.” If you know the story of Narcissus, nothing else need be said. And nothing else that can be said would more illuminate the person's psyche than that mythic story. That's why, as Mary implies, even the would-be scientist Freud had recourse to myth in order to give form to his analysis. *Narcissism* and the *Oedipus Complex* are far more illuminating than anything in the scientific vocabulary of psychiatry.

This is why Mary said in her lecture introducing the paintings that myth is the only way to talk about spiritual and psychological events. Such experience cannot otherwise be articulated in words. Myths do not correct or change or explain reality, she said, but they illuminate it, and they do so because what happens in myth, legend, and story corresponds so completely to reality, as completely as mathematics corresponds to the physical world (so that based on math we can send a man to the moon and back). In this sense—the correspondence of the mythic story to the reality of our inner lives—the myths prove to be not the opposite of facts but deeply true. Of course Mary was not pretending to be a prophet. As Philip Thompson rightly says (see below), the astrological image in her painting is a “fable.” Mary uses that image, and the images from alchemy and tarot, not to promote an atavistic paganism but to convey her own visionary understanding of redemption, of the way it works in human life. She calls the mythic images into the service of her vision believing that the imagination illuminated by myth can be a vehicle of truth.

When we look at Mary’s images of a dragon and a unicorn, then, we are likely to believe we have outgrown such childish notions, whether or not we disapprove of the friends who buy images of them in vacation gift shops. Hearing that a set of paintings is called *The Return of Aquarius* will evoke in those who came of age in the sixties and seventies the cotton-candy song from the musical *Hair*—“This is the dawning of the age of Aquarius, age of Aquarius . . .” “Oh wow! naked people on the Broadway stage! how avant-garde!” In younger people it might evoke nothing at all. But like the story of Cupid and Psyche in the hands of C.S. Lewis (*Till We Have Faces*), or the ancient Irish gods in the hands of James Stephens (*The Crock of Gold*), or even a faun in the hands of Edward Ormondroyd (*David and the Phoenix*), these mythic images in Mary’s hands take on, for those who know or have patience to learn the stories, profound meanings that could not possibly be conveyed in any other way and that offer valuable illumination of our inner life.

With this in mind, let me tell you a little about the the mythic stories behind the paintings. If we know them and know the changes Mary is working upon them, perhaps we will gain access to the profound experience of meaning that Mary has made available in these paintings to our hearts and minds through our eyes and our empathic response.

Mary painted *The Return of Aquarius* to address the condition of our time, in which there is almost universal skepticism and despair about the meaning of things, and in which there is a shared expectation of the end of the world. How often are we told, how often do we believe, that the world is coming to an end. When I was in junior high school, nuclear war was going to be the end of us. When I was in college the world was going to freeze, or all human beings were going to die of overpopulation, always twenty or thirty years in the future. (The predictions would be conveniently forgotten by the time they didn’t come true.) In 1999 the world was going to grind to a halt because the computers were not programmed to be ready for Y2K (the year 2000). Nowadays we are told that global warming will do us in, or an asteroid, or a virus. Some fear, as Mary did, that we might run out of fresh water. We all seem to believe that the world cannot go on as it is. Some fantasize that an undefined socialist utopia will arise from the world’s ashes. Others may expect that the coming age will be inspired by a new revelation of the nature of God as yet unimaginable. In all these end-of-times scenarios our period is akin to the first century B.C., whose general despair and longing for redemption produced a multiplication of cults—

Jewish sects, Gnosticism, Mithraism, Zoroastrianism, and Manicheism, as well as early Christianity.

In addition, Mary observed that our time is characterized by a tremendous movement toward the dematerialization of the world. Think of all the “realities” we experience every day that have almost nothing to do with material presence, all our techniques of invisibility: We are accustomed to conversing with people who are actually far away; we can listen to dead people singing, like Bing Crosby or Elvis Presley, or watch them making us laugh, like Charlie Chaplin or Groucho Marx. We all believe in germs though we’ve never seen one. Mary loved the idea that we can make an electric circuit merely by photographing a circuit. We know that the room we are sitting in is filled with people conversing, playing musical instruments, having political debates, and trying to sell things even when we are alone; all we need in order to hear them is a radio. And Mary lived long enough to be able to add, “and this is nothing compared to the dematerialization going on on those chips!” meaning computer microchips. There is a terrible combination of physical reality and the absence of it, so, she pointed out, there are men who can still fall in love with Greta Garbo—“God forbid they should get a look at her!” she added; Garbo was then age 77. Given these invisibles, does it take much faith to believe that meaningful events are taking place in the air around us even if we don’t have a radio handy? To believe that vast quantities of information can be stored on a microchip the size of your thumbnail? Is the dematerialization of our time merely imaginary? Think of AI and wi-fi. We have all come to believe in the reality of the invisible.

In response to her observation about our sense of the end of things, our experience of dematerialization detaching us from the natural world, and our longing for transformation and a new energizing vision of meaning, Mary set herself the task of making the reality of spiritual transformation visible to us so that, seeing it, we could believe in it. Based on her recognition of the power of myth to speak truthfully to the condition of our time, to illuminate the potential for transformation, Mary drew images from the mythic stories of astrology, alchemy, the Tarot, tales of the Hasidim, and Christianity. But “astrology” to Mary was not the frivolous bluff of the daily newspaper’s horoscope column. “Alchemy” was not just a ruse for nipping other people’s gold. The Tarot was not just a card game. For Mary these ancient mythic languages were great repositories of wisdom that she called upon for images by which to bring healing insight to us all.

For example, the old astrology was not merely a way of predicting the future. It was a way of thinking about the structure of reality. In the old astrological tradition, arising from ancient Persia, the stars participated in the order of creation, corresponding to and influencing the life of man on earth. Mary said she had read an article explaining that when the three Magi came to King Herod of Jewry, it was not because they were following a star that moved forward in front of them “the way we learned in the hymns.” They were following the stars “in the same way that you’d follow a cookbook,” she said. In Persian astrology Jupiter represented a king or kingship; Saturn represented the Jews; and Pisces represented the Holy Land. At the time of the birth of Jesus there was a conjunction of the planets Saturn and Jupiter, and the world was leaving the astrological house of Aries and entering the house of Pisces. It was based on this reading of the stars that the three Magi came to the Holy Land to ask King Herod, “Where is the king of the Jews?”

In that astrological tradition, in addition to the cycle of the year during which the sun passes through the twelve houses of the zodiac—so that you know from your birthday that you are a Scorpio or a Sagittarius—the cycle of the great astrological year, twelve periods of 2,000 years each, moves backward through the signs of the zodiac—the age of Taurus, followed by that of Aries, then Pisces, then Aquarius—instead of forward as in the solar year. As Jesus lived in the beginning of the age of Pisces, we live at the end of the age of Pisces and the beginning of the age of Aquarius. The painting then ties these astrological ages to historical time: Ancient eras correspond to the ages of Taurus (the bull having been worshipped in India, Egypt, the Mediterranean, and elsewhere) and Aries (the ram having been sacred in ancient France and significant in the Old Testament). The Christian era corresponds with the age of Pisces, the fish, which is both the earliest and the latest symbol of Christ (visible on ancient sarcophagi and on present-day bumper stickers). The Greek word for fish, *Ichthus*, is read as an acrostic of “Iesous Christos, Theou Hyios, Soter” (“Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour”). Mary depicts the age now beginning as presided over by the astrological symbol of Aquarius, the Water Bearer, the bringer of spiritual enlightenment.

According to Mary, the dawning age will also produce, eventually, a new vision of the nature of God as the Holy Spirit, to be revealed in a third testament. This belief arises from Mary’s combining the astrological imagery with the prophecy of the 12th-century mystic and theologian Abbot Joachim of Flora. A devout believer in the Christian concept of the triune (three-in-one) nature of God, Joachim foresaw that the age of the Old Testament devoted to God the Father (the power of God) and that of the New Testament devoted to God the Son (the love of God) would be followed by a third age and a third testament devoted to God the Holy Spirit (the wisdom of God). But whereas Joachim imagined each age lasting a millennium, Mary expanded the length of each age to two millennia to correspond with the astrological ages of the Great Year and with historical time as we now see it. The Water Bearer fits this trinitarian idea because the Holy Spirit can never be depicted by a visible figure but must always be represented symbolically, and the symbols used have always been water and fire. Thus uniting Christian and astrological prophecies, the paintings depict the spirit in repeated images of water and of fire. We can confidently believe that this third revelation and its testament will appear, said Mary, because of the accuracy of myth in illuminating reality.

Why are the paintings to be read from right to left? Mary thought that the transition from one age (Pisces) to the next (Aquarius) would be accompanied by a general reversal of things. Her example was that Hebrew, written in the age of Ares, was succeeded by Latin, written in the age of Pisces. Hebrew is read from right to left, Latin from left to right. Mary pointed out that writing from left to right prevents the ink from smearing (because most people are right-handed) and then said “but now who’s using ink?” (I am writing this on a computer.) All things, she said, like writing, will be curiously reversed.

The inscription flanking the paintings is also read from right to left. It is two stanzas from the hymn *Veni Sancte Spiritus* (“Come Holy Spirit”), dating also from the 12th century, found in the Roman Catholic liturgy for the mass of Pentecost. It has been ascribed to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Cardinal Stephen Langton (c. 1150–1228), to Pope Innocent III (c. 1160–1216), and to others. (The calligraphy was done by Bruce Cantz.) It reads:

*O lux beatissima,
reple cordis intima
tuorum fidelium.*

*Sine tuo numine
nihil est in homine,
nihil est innoxium.*

[O most blessed light,
fill the inmost heart
of your faithful.

Without your divine spirit
nothing is in man,
nothing is innocent.]

The second of these stanzas asserts that innocence is not an achievement but a gift of grace, and man's duty and joy is to know that. Mary's painting is an attempt to remind us of it. According to Mary, the last part of the inscription applies especially to the present time, in which we find it impossible to believe that anything can be innocent—not government, not society, not the founding ideals of the nation, not the founding ideals of the civilization, certainly not the rebels against those ideals, and especially not ourselves. Nothing can be innocent that is not visited by the Holy Spirit and transformed.

Reading the painting from right to left moves us forward in historical time and in stages within the inner life.

The figure in Panel 1 is a shepherd, living, partly by necessity, in close proximity to animals and in harmony with them and with the whole natural world surrounding him. He holds a serpent in a cup, an image of bringing under government our destructive impulses and the destructive potentialities in the world. The image comes from a legend of St. John, who, given a cup of poisoned wine, blessed it before drinking, whereupon the poison rose out of the cup in the form of a serpent. It also appears in Chapter 47 of *The Golden Ass* of Apuleius, where in a vision the goddess Isis (identified there with Minerva, Venus, Diana, Proserpine, Ceres, Juno, Bellona, Hecate, and Rhamnusia/Nemesis) rises from the sea holding a cup of gold from which an asp lifts up its head. The shepherd, like the bull (Taurus), the ram (Aries), and the fish (Pisces), is a precursor, pointing toward the coming despair at the loss of the world of innocence and to the transformation and redemption that will follow.

When one power begins to lose its potency, and before the next appears, the feeling is despair. Hence in Panel 2 the cup lies overturned, signifying the loss of government over the destructive powers of nature and self. The waters of the spirit are being poured on the ground, indicating the failure to see anything but futility in any other kind of action. The world appears to be emptied of spirit. Nonetheless, there is hope: the sun is rising, and from the seemingly uninhabited house on fire a voice is heard. Mary took this image from a Hasidic retelling of an

exemplum in the midrash (ancient work of scriptural interpretation) called *Genesis Rabbah* (39:1):

Rabbi Isaac said: It is like one who was passing from place to place and saw a palace in flames. He wondered, "Can this palace have no master?" The lord of the palace looked upon him and said to him, "I am the lord of the palace." Similarly did Abraham our father wonder, "Can this world have no master?" The Holy One Blessed be He looked upon him and said to him, "I am the lord of the world."

Martin Buber concludes his description of the retelling of the tale by Hasidic Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk by saying that those who heard him say "I am the lord of the castle" "were struck with great reverence, for they all felt: 'the castle is burning, but it has a lord.'" As Philip Thompson puts it below, "The spiritual emptiness of the universe is always an illusion."

But how is the despair to be overcome? Mary claimed it was only by hitting bottom, like an alcoholic on skid row. Only when there is recognition that one cannot go further down can one somehow bounce back, as if pushing off from that ground below which one cannot fall. This lowest point is symbolized in Panel 3 by the alchemical image of the dragon swallowing the virgin we saw in Panel 2.

Like astrology, alchemy has gotten a bad rap. Because actual alchemists used as a symbol of their efforts the transformation of lead into gold, people came to believe that alchemy was nothing but a con game and that all alchemists were merely out to bilk the trusting of their gold. Eventually many posed as alchemists to do just that. "Give me a lot of lead and a small bit of gold," they'd say. "The gold will seed the transformation and all your lead will become gold. The more gold and lead you bring me, the more gold you will have." Then the con men would skip town with the gold, leaving the lead unchanged. But that was only a late decayed development. Mary pointed out that the original goal of alchemy was not to get wealth but to achieve the philosophers' stone, by which the alchemist could transform the lower in *all* realms to the higher, the transformation of base lead into incorruptible gold being only a symbol of that general purpose. She also found it moving that the true alchemical discipline required not only the symbolic sacrifice of the virgin to the dragon—meaning innocence to the devouring of the time-bound, destructive world—but also the presence of a mutually loving man and woman. It is the only ancient wisdom tradition that required a loving couple to achieve its aim, in this case finding the philosophers' stone and thereby raising us out of our isolation and loneliness and the sufferings of life.

The dragon's devouring of the virgin is also an image of the fate of Saint Margaret of Antioch, patron saint of childbirth, who, according to the legend, was thrown into prison for her faith and swallowed by a dragon. But when she spoke the name of God, the dragon split open and she stepped unharmed from the belly of the beast. In other of Mary's paintings that miracle becomes an image of the birth of the human child out of its mother's blood and slime and of the human spirit out of the blood and slime of the physical world. Here the dragon devours the virgin, who is holding a cup of flames. As Mary said, fire is one of the two images (the other being water) by which spirit is depicted in art. Here the virgin holds fire under government as the Shepherd in Panel 1 held the serpent. There what was being contained was destructive power. Here what is being contained is the redemptive power of the spirit. Once the virgin's sacrifice is complete, the dragon regurgitates her. She, the human soul, is now become herself the

philosophers' stone, and the dragon tosses her into the air, where she is caught by the unicorn and borne upward toward the heavens.

The virgin with the head of a unicorn in her lap is another common theme in Mary's paintings. In medieval lore the rare unicorn, whose horn was believed to be a powerful antidote and curative and therefore extremely valuable, was a fierce and unconquerable beast that could not be caught by hunters directly. Only when a pure virgin sat singing in the forest would the unicorn come and lay its head in her lap, whereupon the hunters could surprise, capture, and kill it for its horn. The innocent virgin and powerful unicorn became an image of the incarnation of Christ and of the divine compassion it represented. The unicorn is Christ, who willingly chooses to be borne into the world by a virgin in order that he might be killed and thereby cure mankind of sin and death. Panel 5 depicts a great reversal, the fruition of the sacrifice of Panel 3. The unicorn (an image of the power of the spirit) now catches the virgin and carries her—carries all of us—in ecstatic triumph up to the Water Bearer.

The Water Bearer himself, Aquarius, who presides over this process of transformation, stands on the burned ground of Panel 2, now filling an empty vessel with the waters of the spirit, bearing to mankind the new dispensation of spiritual renewal. The image of Aquarius, obviously influenced by images of Apollo, the god of the sun, and of Christ, is, in his pouring of the waters of the spirit from one vessel to another, merged with the Tarot image of Temperance, who mixes cold and hot, yin and yang, desire and sacrifice, time and eternity, and offers the tempered waters of the spirit to the world thirsty for the harmony of peace, joy, and fulfillment. Mary said that generally men desire perfection and women desire completeness. The bearer of the waters of the spirit here bestows the harmony of both upon the world.

Once the blessing of spirit is granted, the sacrifice and transformation accomplished, then the waters of the spirit can rise to baptize and fecundate the world. Panel 6 depicts the lushness and fertility of life redeemed from the dryness and despair of Panel 2. The three women are really one woman in her three aspects, another familiar theme in Mary's work. Mary refused to countenance the reductive and combative feminism of our time, which she thought did great injury to both women and men. She thought of woman as having three aspects, by which the lives of all creatures in the world, including men, are enriched. Woman is always in a way a young, erotically attractive, flirting, virgin bride; she is always in another way a caring, nourishing, providing mother; and she is always also a prophetess. Woman's most valuable gift, according to Mary, is wisdom, the capacity to worship the spirit and to be its vehicle in the life of the world. The three women, who are Woman, stand in water and hold cups of flame. The rising of the waters is an image of the blessing of the spirit upon the physical world, a baptism, contrasting with the image of waters of the spirit fruitlessly poured upon dry ground in Panel 2, where the apparent spiritual emptiness of the physical seems to devour the spirit. The white bird derives from Genesis 1:2 ("And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters"), the dove that brought Noah the olive leaf (sign of the earth's restoration after the flood, Genesis 8:11), the dove that represents the descent of the Holy Spirit in all four New Testament Gospels (Matthew 3:16, Mark 1:10, Luke 3:22, John 1:32), and the doves sacred to Aphrodite/Venus, the goddess of love and beauty.

In Panel 7 Mary depicts the final fruition of the whole transforming process. The original Man and Woman were forced out of the Garden of Eden, the harmonious world of innocence depicted in Panel 1, into the world of labor and pain, despair and death. Now Man and Woman, the new Adam and the new Eve, are at home and at play in the tree of knowledge, which is also the tree of life, and the world begins again, *above* the world. The desires of man for perfection and of woman for completeness are united in a joyful union of opposites. In Chinese philosophy, the Tao (the Way, both of the universe and of man) is a whole made up of the harmonious union of opposite principles: yin, representing the shadow side of the mountain, the moon, the feminine, the dark, the receptive, the yielding, as of water; and yang, representing the sunny side of the mountain, the sun, the masculine, the light, the active, the unyielding, as of rock. (Mary explained that the Chinese term for “landscape” is “mountain-water picture,” implying “yang-yin picture.”) That union of equal opposites, usually imaged in the yin-yang or tai-chi symbol, is here represented by the colors in which Adam and Eve are painted. The reversals brought about by the return of Aquarius include the reversal of the colors associated with male and female: The new Adam is here painted in cool yin colors and the new Eve in warm yang colors. Mary said, when the Messiah comes, the moon will be as bright as the sun (alluding to Isaiah 30:26). The reversal of the soul’s exile from the harmonious natural world is celebrated in joy, completing the alchemical transformation that spirit works in the lives of men.

Perhaps now Mary’s terse description of the work will make sense to you. She writes:

We move backward through the Zodiac: Taurus, Aries, Pisces; each constellation dominant for two thousand years to make up the Great Year.

Now Aquarius stands on the burned earth pouring the divine energy, the water of life, from one pitcher to another. On the far right the precursors, the Bull, the Ram, the Fishes live in the dawn world, at one with earth and sea, in a garden with a shepherd and his dog. The shepherd foresees the exile, the loss, when the sweet companions will be gone and the waters spilled on the sand.

What sacrifice will allow the Unicorn to carry the soul to the sky? The virgin must be devoured by the Dragon.

Then the water can rise and white birds fly. All now shall have the flame and shall stand in the living water. Even the two, bound together by their difference, will frolic in the trees.

So the world moves through the constellations and so we move, in a day, an hour, a moment of time, from Paradise, innocent as animals, to isolation and despair, to a little death in the belly of the dragon. Yet through that alchemy lifted on the Unicorn to the Divine presence of the Water-bearer.

Now again we can celebrate. The waters rise, the beloved tree contains us.

The poet Philip Thompson, a devoted friend of Mary, recorded his understanding of the mural as follows:

The Return of Aquarius is an epic achievement in the endeavor as Mary describes it “of making the invisible visible.” The mural depicts a spiritual journey from Creation to Redemption. It is a journey both broadly historical and intimately personal.

Imagery and ideas from Judaism, Christianity, astrology, and alchemy are woven together along with her own pictorial inventions to draw us through the narrative. Water is the central image. We follow its movement across the mural from right to left.

In the painting’s myth the coming of the great astrological year of Aquarius to succeed that of Pisces is equated with the arrival of the dispensation of the Holy Spirit that follows the ages of the Father and the Son . . . and establishes an earthly heaven of peace, perfection, and spiritual fulfillment. The astrological fable is a good one since in the old poetic tradition of the zodiac, Aquarius, the Water Bearer, stands for clarity, vision.

The journey begins with a single person in a lush garden setting of numinous innocence. We move through a desert of exile and despair to the point of being devoured by the dragons of life. But in that “little death,” the process of elevation can begin. The central figure, Aquarius, the water bearer, presides over this transformation to new life by filling the empty vessel with thirst-quenching waters. Revived, the young girl is carried off triumphantly by the unicorn. The waters that revive also cleanse and refresh—a kind of baptism.

The last stage of the journey is represented by a man and a woman at play and at home, above the world, in the tree of knowledge. Now they are (and we would be) fully cooperative partners in the Divine Plan.

The Return of Aquarius takes us on the journey that each of us travels in a lifetime in a day, in a moment, delighting and encouraging us with a vision of redemption.

Panel 1 (far right):

A first-Adam, precursor figure, clothed in a skin and holding a staff, is flanked by sacred animals (ram and bull) and attended by his animal brother the dog. Landscape of rich fields, bright quiet sky – the book of the creatures: Spirit and nature indistinguishable in the pastoral imagination, spirit both omnipresent and hidden.

Panel 2 (second to right):

Abomination of desolation: In a wasteland stretching far into the distance a woman empties a vessel of water onto the sand. Man withdrawn from the divine pictured as the divine withdrawn from man and nature (an illusion, represented by a tiny burning building in the background [based on] a Hasidic tale of a Rabbi who, passing by a burning house because he assumed no one was in it, heard a cry coming from the midst of the flames: moral—the spiritual emptiness of the universe is always an illusion.)

Panels 3, 4, 5 (middle, right to left):

Virgin half-swallowed by a dragon (3) is connected by a rainbow-like band of light to the virgin astride a prancing unicorn (5). The rainbow passes behind the head of Aquarius (4), a towering, glowing naked man who pours water between two pitchers and who is enclosed by a ring of fiery light. Here (3) is the penultimate stage of the great alchemical work, the negation of matter that precedes its transformation into spirit. Here (5) is life transcending all destructions of matter and spirit, a world of pure form, intention, meaning. Virgin and dragon appear upon a landscape underneath a large sky filled with strips of luminous cloud—virgin and unicorn are in this sky—Aquarius stands in a supernatural light.

Panel 6 (second to left):

Images of the state of paradise with a feminine theme. Three women half immersed in a stream – baptismal water, moisture on leaves, three aspects of woman: virgin, bride, matron [or rather: virgin-bride, matron, and seer-prophetess]—amid thick shining foliage, a dove hovering just overhead. A world “saturated with spirit” in Mary’s words. [In a letter, Philip wrote about “The water, in which everyone has lived for nine months and the human race for nine million years”: “[Rather] the water, in which the human form is perfected for its first birth, and which in the beginning received the spirit of God in the first movement of universal creation . . . (Because we do not allow the theory of evolution in its ‘that’s all there is to it’ form, and that is the form in which the theory is universally expressed and held.)

Panel 7 (far left):

Panel 7 represents the new Adam and the new Eve—exchange of attributes: man in yin colors, woman in yang, transcendence of mere sex [compare with John Donne’s “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning”] as sovereigns of a redeemed nature, a dance in repose upon the boughs of a tree. [In a letter, Philip wrote about the “exchange of attributes upon rebirth”: “To portray redeemed humanity as the composer of transfiguring spiritual music rather than as the product of formal variations on a theme.”]

With this sketchy description about all one can say is magnificent! moving! inspiring! beautiful! Everything is painted with such strength and beauty and subtlety—light, landscapes, animals, figures—Mary is a miracle.

The last time Philip Thompson visited Cowell college to see Mary’s paintings again, he studied *The Return of Aquarius* for a long while, and, before we left, he said, deeply moved, “Since the Seventeenth Century, there is Goya, and there is Mary.”

Now look again at the images of the paintings. Can you find meaning pouring through them, through your eyes, through your empathic response, into the heart, making visible the invisible reality of spiritual transformation? If not, blame the poverty of art reproduction and make your way, if you can, to Cowell College, UCSC, in Santa Cruz, California, to look at the mural in person. There you may hope to benefit from the miracle that was Mary.

Right-hand Panels:



Central Panels:



Left-hand Panels:

