Practicing Mortality: Art, Philosophy, and Contemplative Seeing

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INTRODUCTION

What It Means to See

In his remarkable book *Only the Lover Sings: Art and Contemplation*, Josef Pieper laments:

> Man's ability to see is in decline. Those who nowadays concern themselves with culture and education will experience this fact again and again. We do not mean here . . . the physiological sensitivity of the human eye. We mean the spiritual capacity to perceive the visible reality as it truly is.[1]

Understanding the kind of vision to which Pieper alludes is the central concern of *Practicing Mortality*. Like Pieper, the authors of this book believe that living is deeply entwined with seeing (as distinct from simply looking), that is to say, seeing contemplatively and with full awareness.

This is a genuinely collaborative undertaking between an art historian and a philosopher, rather than two separate treatises clothed as one, in which art is indentured to philosophy or the other way around. It comes from a decade of teaching together, and countless hours of conversation. Indeed, this book is, in large measure, a conversation on what we love about art and philosophy, and how that love has ineluctably become part of our own living.

We talk about how art and philosophy can help one live life more fully, each and every day. This may seem odd, or overly sentimental, to those who regard art and philosophy as occasional activities, at best. Art and philosophy are generally thought of as being quite separate from everyday life, as well as from each other. Art—so-called high Art, with a capital A—is usually set apart, in museums, often behind glass, or in upscale and rather forbidding galleries. It can frequently seem to be about things very few people understand or care about. Philosophy, meanwhile, is identified with the most abstruse and isolated of academic pursuits. With its abstract arguments and highly technical vocabulary, it, too, is seen as impractical and often irrelevant—as specialized as the art world seems to be. While philosophy

claims to address questions of importance to all of us, its own pretensions (or pretentiousness) sets it apart from the everyday cares and business of living in much the same way that the pretensions of "high Art" seem to do. Not only do art and philosophy seem to be isolated from "real" or "everyday" life, but also seem to be as separate from one another as thinking and feeling, experience and analysis have come to be.

The authors of this book see things differently. Although most people presume to know what real or everyday life is all about, without the help of art or philosophy, we question this presumption. There are many books, both academic and popular, that are concerned with the "art of living," or with the idea of philosophy as a way of life. Yet, for the most part, the writers of these works do not envision the act of reading the text as an occasion to work through and actually practice its content. One of the ambitions of our book is to provide that opportunity as a pattern (not a formula or prescription) for a life-fulfilling practice of contemplative seeing. Art and philosophy, as invoked here, are to be lived and not merely talked about. We make the case that art and philosophy are not at odds with daily life; they are, in fact, essential to life itself.

For us, the vital connection between art, philosophy, and life lies not in the application of a set of ideas but in the very act of seeing. In making our case, we are appealing to multiple audiences. Since our vocations place us, as Pieper contends, among "those who nowadays concern themselves with culture and education," students are at the center of our attention. We are fortunate to have taught in a liberal arts setting, with young undergraduate minds open to change and transformation. Because the work presented here was shaped by our own academic experience, we believe that teachers—that is, other academics—might also benefit from this book. In our view, its central theme bears directly on their work—work they should be doing, but are uncertain how to do. Contemplative seeing has wide-ranging implications for the development of pedagogical method in many disciplines. Focus, concentration, and awareness are vital to education itself, as well as to living fully. In addition to students and teachers, this book is addressed to a wide range of practicing and general readers. Craft and creativity are central to our thinking about art and philosophy. In our view, the practice of mortality and the practice of the arts are not simply analogous to one another, nor does the latter serve merely to supplement or ornament the former. This book tries to revive the sense in which they are fundamentally one and the same. In helping others discover life in art, we hope that artists themselves will find affirmation and renewal in, and perhaps learn something from, what we see in the activities that comprise their daily work. The arts we discuss include painting, architecture, and music (among others), but also such seemingly humble pursuits as gardening and even walking. While this book addresses what is often referred to as the "inner life," the authors also intend to show how attendance upon the "inner" presupposes an engagement with the world around us. By deepening our understanding of the practical dimension of contemplative practice, our work dovetails with that

of others who are concerned with similar approaches to spiritual direction. The recovery of the inner, we shall argue, requires faithful attention to and a certain kind of reverence for the "outer." The spirituality that comes to the fore here is coupled with a renewed sense of, and appreciation for, materiality—both our own and that of the world around us.

What, then, does it really mean to see? How does one begin to answer this question, or even to show that it needs to be raised? We have chosen to begin with Eric Sloane, who might be unfamiliar to some readers. Sloane (who lived from 1905 to 1985) was what used to be called an Americanist; that is, a student of Americana. Artist, illustrator, and writer, Sloane collected and observed material facts and objects reflective of the early American way of life. Buildings and tools were among his principal passions, as were weather and wood. His observations, descriptions, and illustrations of these everyday things, and of the lives they reflected and shaped, reveal both a keen physiological sensitivity *and* a profound spiritual capacity. They also display a full sense of humanity. Sloane was drawn to the endurance, attentiveness, and reverence that characterized the pioneer farmers of eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century New England. While an unlikely source for art historical or philosophical research, he and his work have taught us a great deal about what it means to see.

In *Diary of an Early American Boy* (a historically based account of the everyday life of a boy named Noah, from the year 1805) Sloane observes:

> In modern times when everything a person needs may be bought in a store, there are very few hand-made things left. So we are robbed of that rare and wonderful satisfaction that comes with personal accomplishment. In Noah's time, nearly every single thing a person touched was the result of his own efforts. . . . This is why those people had an extraordinary awareness of life. It was this awareness of everything about them that made the life of early American people so full of inner satisfaction, so grateful for life and all that went with it. Nowadays modern conveniences allow us to be forgetful, and we easily become less aware of the wonders of life.[2]

Here, Sloane is not simply making a claim about history. His observation is grounded in his own historical awareness, but it is not simply an observation about the objective conditions of rural existence in 1805. It is an observation about the meaningfulness of that existence, and about where the source of that meaningfulness might ultimately be seen to lie.

What Sloane is recalling may look like a quaintly antique way of life. The academically minded would probably see it as a social construction—a fable at best, a mendacious fiction at worst. To see it in either of these ways is to miss the deeper point. This is not just an academic point about historically conditioned ways of life. It is a point about life itself, and what it could mean

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to be fully human. In attributing an "extraordinary awareness" and "inner satisfaction" to otherwise ordinary people, Sloane hopes that we, too, might be made aware of something. He is recalling us to something he thinks we have forgotten—not just the facts of (early-nineteenth-century) life, but the *wonders* of life. To see the point would be to experience the inner satisfaction he describes. It would be to "realize" something, in both senses of the word. Sloane's aim, in writing about the things he does, is to foster this kind of realization. It is also the aim of the present book.

In the passage quoted above, Sloane explicitly differentiates between two ways of living. One is characterized by a vital and direct engagement with things. These include, in the first instance, humanly made things, objects of art, or craft, for which natural things and even nature itself are seen as providing the ultimate source. To look upon, work with, or "touch" a handmade thing is not just to see the results of one's own efforts, or a confirmation of one's power and control over nature. What Sloane calls the "rare and wonderful satisfaction" that issues from "personal accomplishment" extends beyond the merely personal, or even the merely human, to become an awareness of and gratitude "for life and *all* that went with it."

It is not just our technological abilities that provide us with this inner satisfaction. Technological production, as such, may instill a feeling of confidence or convenience, security, or self-reliance. But Sloane is not talking about mere *self*-satisfaction, about comfort or pride, or even about happiness (in the modern sense of the term). This is the deeper point of the contrast he makes between handmade things and what he calls modern conveniences.

When Sloane associates making things with a profound awareness of "the wonders of life," he is not describing an attitude in which we enjoy or exult only in what we have created or can make happen all by ourselves. What moved these early American people to wonder, what they were able to be grateful for, Sloane thinks, was not the means to a "better" life, but life itself. Sloane is describing an attitude of acknowledgment and of thanks—acknowledgment that what creates the need for these things is what ultimately provides for the satisfaction of those needs. He is describing a life that reflects the marvelous creatures that human beings are, in the sense not just that we ourselves are to be marveled at, but that we are capable of marveling at the world around us. It is our own creative activities that provide the occasion for this, but only to the extent that we can see these activities as a way of giving thanks for and acknowledging a gift that we do not simply give ourselves.

The creative activities to which Sloane refers are regular and routine. They are woven into everyday life. Day in and day out, these activities, and the life that is fashioned through them, enabled human beings to find contentment—which differs from convenience or comfort—and to experience wonder in a world that is never wholly free of sorrow or hardship but one that is wonder*ful* nonetheless. To put it in a way that anticipates the fundamental thesis of this book: art, or human creation, both

originates in and promises to yield a loving awareness of that which we ourselves do not make. It is this realization, if we are capable of it, that makes us fully human.

Regardless of what the current market in inspirational or self-improvement literature may suggest, a way of living cannot be reduced to a single formula. If we were to identify a single phrase that best captures the attitude Sloane is describing, however, it would be *the attitude of mortality*. This attitude is, fundamentally, a contemplative one—a way of being that is grounded in a way of seeing (the "extraordinary awareness" to which Sloane refers). It is also a fundamentally practical one; for this way of seeing is itself grounded in a kind of activity that is essentially different from what we commonly recognize as productivity or busy-ness. The latter is what characterizes the other way of living to which Sloane alludes with his talk of "modern times" and "conveniences." While it would be easy to describe this modern way of living as the opposite of the one Sloane wishes to celebrate, or as simply lacking the awareness that Sloane thinks early American people possessed, this, too, would miss the point.

Sloane would no doubt join those of us who lament a way of living that is characterized by a reckless, unthinking abuse of nature and of one another—one that all too often seems to involve the living of pointless lives. This is a way of living dominated by a way of *seeing* that regards nature—indeed regards everything, life itself and all that goes with it—as subject to control rather than a realm for which to be thankful.

Sloane's primary concern, however, is not that "modern conveniences" will make us more manipulative and violent (though that may indeed be the case). It is that they can make us less aware. His insight (the insight we develop in this book) is not just that there is something missing from our modern way of life despite the material abundance and security it provides; it is that our way of seeing can make us forgetful of that which we are no longer able to see. The problem is not that we are failing to live fully human lives, for how would one "prove" that? The real danger is that we are so easily allowed to forget what that could mean, where this forgetfulness is not simply the result of our short attention span or memory—after all, we can retain more "information" than ever before—but of our way of seeing and being in the world. We don't know what we're missing, and can't recognize it when it is right before our eyes.

As a way to explore this more profound, and more dangerous, form of forgetfulness, consider how we "moderns" might make sense of the way of seeing what Sloane is trying to recollect. The attitude of mortality, as we would describe it, is fundamentally contemplative, but also fundamentally practical. How can it be both? When we think of a contemplative attitude, after all, we tend to conceive of it as one that is spontaneously receptive and open, but essentially passive. We picture the meditative trance of the mystic, the speculative musing of the philosopher, or the rapt gaze of the nature-lover. To contemplate, in this sense, is to think or to see in a way that may be thoroughly immersed in a transcendent or metaphysical reality,

but is essentially detached from the concrete realities surrounding us. Philosophical contemplation is, perhaps, the paradigm for what is ordinarily conceived of as a purely "theoretical" *and essentially "impractical"* way of thinking about or observing things. The contemplative mystic, for example, is the common template of the religious person who lives an essentially solitary life in a cell, as opposed to the active life of the saint who goes out into the world and does not merely contemplate but *does* something.

If seeing and thinking are the opposite of "doing," in the way that theory is the opposite of practice and contemplation that of action, how are we to conceive of an attitude that is at once fundamentally contemplative and fundamentally practical? If we have difficulty conceiving of this, it is because we have forgotten what seeing, thinking, and practice themselves might mean, what they might involve, and how they essentially belong together. Or so we argue in this book. What follows, however, is not just an account of our failings. It is an exercise in recollecting that there is a kind of doing that is not simply a matter of producing results, or a means to an end; and that contemplative seeing could, in this sense, be the most deeply practical and the most fully human of human activities. That is, an attempt to remind us that "practical" does not simply mean "useful."

This is exactly what Sloane is getting at. He reminds us of the more fundamental sense in which art or craft is practical. Craft—as we shall see more clearly in Chapter Six: *Making* Kosmos *Visible*—is not simply a useful art, as carpentry or metalwork might seem to be when compared, say, to sculpture. Both are practical in the same fundamental way. They are *routinely practiced* and they *require practice*. This is what we intend to make clear about the way of living that Sloane describes, and which he explicitly contrasts with our own. He would not deny that modern conveniences are often genuinely beneficial for life, nor would we. The point is that, in being simply present and provided for us, on demand and in surplus, such conveniences are practical only in the narrow sense of being useful, at our disposal, and ultimately disposable. Our using them does not involve the deeper dimension of practice that our engagement with handmade things does. Though it may be an overly simplistic example, raising and milking one's own cows, animal or vegetable husbandry, requires practice, and is something one practices daily. Purchasing milk at the supermarket does not, however, require practice. It may be more practical in one sense, but is far less practical in this more fundamental sense.

The way of living Sloane describes is one that is characterized by an extraordinary awareness of life itself, by gratitude and inner satisfaction, one that is governed by routine and daily habit—that is, by daily practice. It is, at the same time, a profoundly contemplative way of life. It draws its sustenance from a capacity for wonder. We are unaccustomed to (and perhaps incapable of) thinking about wonder as something that is practiced, either as an activity that is performed regularly or as one that requires preparation and full-bodied participation. If we are unable to make sense of the "practicality" of contemplative seeing, it is because we have forgotten

how it is originally related to both art and craft, not simply in the way that these might produce useful results, but in the way that they themselves might be experienced as occasions for wonder and as sources of revelation. To remind ourselves of this would be to recover the awareness of our own mortality, the very thing our modern way of living seems designed to help us overcome. It would be to recollect—literally, to "regather"—our humanity.

All of this could easily be seen as just a nostalgic, contemporary view of modernity and its discontents. Sloane, after all, was writing in the mid-twentieth century. But the distinction he draws between a life filled with aesthetic and spiritual richness on the one hand, and an arid, perplexing, and often meaningless existence on the other was as familiar to the ancients as it is today.

The modern world is full of books that are critical of modernity. One difference between the present book and many of these others is that it is not a polemic. The way to recollect, or realize, the fullness of human reality is not, we believe, to identify the problems of modern life in the hope of somehow fixing them, or to diagnose the complaints of the modern condition in the hope of escaping from it. This is partly because our situation is too complex for that. Too many writers and thinkers have made us aware of the fundamental mistakes involved in attempting either to retreat from or to move beyond the modern condition—to resurrect a "pre-" or reconstruct a "post-" modern world. But if we choose not to proceed in a radically polemical way, it is primarily owing to the conviction that what we are attempting to recover is, in reality, nearer at hand than we think. That is why we have used, and will continue to use, the language of recollection and forgetting. This is not just a matter of phrasing. It is a matter of method: a method we believe is better suited to—and crafted in response to a deeper understanding of—the nature of the problem we face. The problem is not modern life as such, as if this were something one might hope to rid oneself of, like a head cold. To picture the problem this way is to forget that it is a problem we live, and not a problem we face objectively, in the way that we face problems with our cars or our plumbing. The problem, to say it again, is realizing what it means to be fully human, fully alive.

Though this book is not a polemic, it does present an argument. It is even contentious at times. This is to be expected, since we are contending with the very troubling problem of living in today's world. Our primary contention is that *we have allowed ourselves to become forgetful of our own mortality and of the need to "practice" it.* Having lost sight of this need, we have, in a sense, lost the ability. This is something that should be obvious with regard to art or craft (though it is becoming less obvious to some teachers and students). If one ceases to practice, or no longer recognizes the need to do so, whatever talent one had will cease to develop and may be lost. This book tries to demonstrate how and why it is also true with regard to contemplative seeing, and ultimately with regard to being human.

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In wondering about what it could mean to practice mortality, about what this practice might concretely involve, we have spent considerable time with, and drawn insight and inspiration from, other writers and thinkers, as well as artists. In writing this book, we engage with and acknowledge them as sources, not in a narrowly documentary or merely academic sense, but in what we hope will prove to be a vital and viable way. Our initial reading of Eric Sloane, to whom we shall return more than once, may serve as an illustration of this. Similarly practical readings and interpretations are woven throughout this book. This is partly to demonstrate how reading and thinking can themselves be practiced in the way that a craft is practiced—not just by using texts to illustrate or support a point but revisiting them habitually. It is also because we believe that these particular writings can serve as vivid reminders of what contemplative seeing (and thinking and reading) is really all about.

We read philosophers, historians, art historians, essayists, and naturalists. We see a striking concurrence in the guidance they offer, even though they may be writing thousands of years apart from one another, in (or about) vastly different cultures, and to vastly different audiences. From Plato to Thoreau to Heidegger and beyond, we gather a family of thinkers who desire to live more fully, to be fulfilled in their daily existence, by seeing contemplatively and with such heightened awareness that all the senses are fully engaged; thinkers who see how the things we create may reflect, and recall the beholder to, a divine point of origin.

Essential to the understanding of practice that we put forward in this book is the notion (one that should be familiar enough to practicing artists and craftsmen) that repetition is progress, that one does not make progress simply as a "result" of doing something over and over again, but that the progress lies in the routine itself. The book is structured in such a way that it both exemplifies this point and provides the reader with an occasion to experience it. This is an experience that may frustrate some readers, as we find ourselves circling back to questions and ideas again and again. For instance, throughout these pages, we frequently return to Pieper's idea of perceiving "the visible reality as it truly is." We do so in the hope of progressively developing and deepening our understanding of this idea. Along the way, we hope also to inspire our readers to pursue for themselves what Pieper calls the "spiritual capacity" for such a seeing and living of their own lives. It is not simply the case that we have read these texts and now wish to explain and clarify them for our audience, presenting only the results of our research. We have tried to write this book in such a way that we read and engage with these sources actively and in the present tense, so that our readings and interpretations might unfold along with those of our own readers. We hope that our readers may be inspired to revisit these sources on their own, to see them (as Pieper would say) "with their own eyes."

Our thinking has taken root in ideas first conceived by ancient philosophers. When the pre-Socratic philosopher Anaxagoras was asked the question, "Why are you here on earth?" (an alternative translation might be,

"What is your purpose in living?") he replied, "To behold." What is it about the idea of "beholding" that could make it an understandable, let alone viable answer to a question such as this? How could "seeing" be so central to human fulfillment?

The beginnings of an answer can be sought not simply in how the Greeks defined these terms, but in how they were understood and experienced. This is where etymology can be of help to us. This is, of course, an extraordinarily complicated task, fraught with intellectual risk, and it is imperative that we reflect upon and try to gain as clear a sense as we can of the spirit in which we undertake it. We must ask ourselves what it could mean to return to the "original" meanings of words, or to forms of experience and understanding as they are expressed in ancient writings. The idea that ancient linguistic, as well as textual, sources can be recalled or recollected in a vitally illuminating and not just a documentary way, is fundamental to the argument of this book. We must confess, here at the outset, to a certain prejudice in our own philosophy of language. The search for word-origins is not just a matter of researching and identifying meanings that were associated, as a matter of historical fact, with certain combinations of letters. The question of how words were "defined" is, in fact, a uniquely modern question—one that reflects a uniquely modern and practical (in the sense of useful) conception of the function of language.

Words must be used, whether they be written, spoken, or sung, before they can be defined. We do not simply call upon them to say what we have to say (this is the modern conception of language as a tool, or instrument). Words themselves are *called for*, one might say they are called forth, by basic forms of experience from which their meaning originates. This is what we are trying to recollect when we search for the original meanings of words. We are not just talking about what certain words used to mean. This would leave us open to the objection that they now mean something very different. The difference we would insist upon is one between not knowing what something once meant, and having forgotten what something originally means. More is at stake where the latter is concerned, and in this regard, we believe, a thoughtful return to ancient textual sources, one that is motivated by human as well as academic interests, can be of vital help to us today.

As an example, let us return to seeing. What could it mean to say, with Anaxagoras, that one's purpose in living is to behold? The phrase Anaxagoras actually used is *eis theorian*, a verbal form of the noun *theōria*, of which the Latin *contemplatio* was a translation. This is where our own "theory" comes from. It may seem appropriate, then, that contemplation would be understood, by us, as "theoretical." But what does *this* originally mean?[3] While *theōria* can and did mean "study," its original meaning is very different from the distinctly modern sense of theory as detached observation or analysis, where theory is opposed to practice. *Theōria* is originally derived from *thea*, outward appearance or show, as in "theatre," and *horaō*, to see or look at something, closely and attentively. With a view to its primary

meaning, *theōria* is best translated as "spectating" and *theōros* (theorist) as "spectator." But care must be taken in understanding the spectatorial attitude of the *theōros*. A *theōros* is someone who sees (or studies), but this seeing (or studying) does not imply detachment in the way that a theoretical stance is supposed to be detached. *Theōroi* were, most commonly, ambassadors to sacred festivals who *actively participated* in the spectacles they beheld by offering sacrifices, and by taking part in the dances and games that formed an integral part of the practice of divine worship.

To recall the original meaning of theory is to recall the original meaning of the human activity of theorizing, grounded as it is in the experience of *theōria*, not an object of detached observation or purely cognitive analysis, but a performative spectacle in which one takes part with one's body as well as one's mind, with one's senses and emotions as well as what we now conceive of as thoughts. The seeing that lies at the heart of *theōria* was active and experientially engaged. The *theōros* did not just examine. He was literally and figuratively moved by what he saw.

It should be emphasized that these spectacles were not purely visual, but that music and dance were essential components. And while, as a matter of historical fact, such spectacles usually took the form of religious festivals, *theōria* was understood as religious in a more profound sense. The Greek *theá* (with the accent on the second syllable) also means goddess: the *thea* of theatre can also be read as the *thea* of "theology." Ancient etymologists tended to assume that this was the real root of *theōria*, and that a *theōros* was someone who performed service to, or cared for, a god (*ōra* means "care"). In this sense, the *theōros* not only attended a religious festival. He attended the divinity whom the festival celebrated.

Modern linguists tend to reject these ancient readings. But if we bear in mind that accents were not introduced into the Greek language until the third century B.C., and that their introduction may not so much reflect as effect a differentiation between elements of meaning that were experienced as belonging together, we do better if we understand the root of *theōria* as being both divine and spectacular, and to understand theory as originating in a seeing that was itself a form of worship. Martin Heidegger's reading of *theōria* as a "reverent paying heed to the unconcealment of what presences" recalls us to this more original meaning, and to the experience that underlies it.[4]

The ability not simply to examine or explain, but to gaze attentively upon, to dwell with, the outward appearances in which "the core of all things, the hidden, ultimate reason of the living universe, the divine foundation of all that is" is made visible, is what Pieper means by contemplative activity.[5] When he says, "to contemplate means first of all to *see*," he means that all genuine theorizing is, fundamentally, an experiencing of the divine. It is a beholding in which one participates fully in what one sees. By harboring mystery, such spectacles move us to wonder. It may be worth noting here that the ancient sources often use *theōros* to refer to a person who travels to a sacred place to consult an oracle. Oracular sayings are not

simply informative. They are revelatory, but also notoriously obscure. The wonder to which they give rise is inseparable from the illumination they promise.

Another ancient source enables us to trace what may be the deepest root of *theōria* back to this experience of illuminating wonder. In Homer, the verb *theaomai* (for which *thea* is a cognate) means "to gaze upon with wonder" or to see with wondering eyes. Both the verb *thaumazein* (to wonder or marvel), and the noun *thauma* (a wonder or marvel) are closely related to *theaomai*, and thus to *theōria*. If it is the mind that thinks, in Homer, it is the eyes that wonder. Wonder wants a spectacle. This is the origin of theory ("it is owing to their wonder," Aristotle later says, "that men now begin and at first began to philosophize"). And while scholars may claim that this archaic understanding of *theōria* has already given way to a more modern sense of theory in Plato, we do well to recall how Plato's *Republic* begins: Socrates left the center of Athens and went down to the harbor to attend a religious festival. He wanted to say a prayer to the goddess as well as to behold the spectacle. Socrates is a *theōros*—one who goes to see and to pray.

The opening scene of the *Republic* preserves the unity of these moments. To see, in the ancient sense of *theōria*, is to pray. While the theoretical discussion that follows appears to move away from this participatory (and prayerful) vision, and toward a way of seeing that is less experientially engaged (and more purely intellectual, or "Platonic"), it is only a stubbornly modern interpretation that fails to see the connection between the origin of the discussion and its ultimate goal. *Eidos*—the word Plato himself uses for what we call a Platonic "idea," or ideal form—is also rooted in the Greek words for (and concrete experience of) seeing and being seen. This is a link that our association of ideas with "concepts" has severed. *Eidos* still draws its meaning from its original source in Plato's own characterization of a philosopher as a *philotheamonas*—one who loves the "spectacle" (the "sights and sounds") of truth. If we ourselves were better able to read Plato's text with wondering eyes, attentive to and moved by the particularities of the spectacle he paints in words, we might better understand what he has to say about the practice of philosophy. Such readings can and should recall us to what we shall later describe as the "liturgical" function of theoretical contemplation, to the original unity of thinking, seeing, wonder, and worship.[6] While the very idea of oracular seeing (and hearing), and of ritual journeys to places of wondrous revelation, may seem impossibly remote to us, this book will show that it lies much closer to home than we are often able to realize.

In the pages that follow, we attend to other writers with this same interest in beholding and participating in the realm of "the visible" as a revelation of the divine. For all of them, a capacity for this kind of contemplative seeing both originates in and is a source of beautiful art and well-made craft. It is the source of genuine philosophy by which we mean the daily-lived love of wisdom, and the source of our humanity as well.

To see with wondering eyes, for these thinkers as well as for the present authors, is an activity that makes one fully human. This is the prepared vision that Thoreau actively celebrates on his walks—one that is fully open and responsive to nature as a source, rather than just a resource, and is practiced "religiously" in a sense that we shall come to appreciate. It is the cultivated vision described by Okakura Kakuzo in *The Book of Tea*—a way of seeing that "regulates our existence on this tumultuous sea of foolish troubles we call life," and thus "beatifies the mundane." It is the direct, intuitive vision involving not just the intellect but the whole soul which Plato describes as the culmination of philosophical thinking. It is the loving acceptance of reality that Eric Sloane recognizes in the early American craftsman's "reverence for wood," a love that is enacted and a reality that is known, not just by the cognitive faculty but through the movements of the hand. It is the heart of Esther de Waal's insistence on "mindfulness" in her splendid book, *Seeking God*. It is what Heidegger seeks to recover in leading us to think reverently and patiently, following "the path of a responding that examines as it listens." Following such paths, Heidegger says, "takes practice." It is, essentially, the practice of a craft. Such a way of thinking, Heidegger shows, is in itself a way of being.

This practiced seeing and insightful beholding, rare but achievable, is what Pieper and all the thinkers gathered here call to our attention. The fundamental ideas of these writers will be brought to life in the work that we are undertaking—the work of learning to behold the visible reality as it truly is.

We shall set about this task by looking attentively at—indeed, dwelling with—works of art as well as philosophical ideas about art and craft in relation to each other and to everyday human experience. We hope that our readers will come to participate in this text as its own sort of spectacle; that from it they will be moved to wonder, sensuously and emotionally as well as intellectually, about human nature and about the nature of their own experience. We pose the question: What do art and philosophy contribute to the fullness of human reality in such a way that we may ultimately come to see that to live artfully and philosophically is what it means to be truly alive. That a capacity for contemplative seeing is the source not only of art and philosophy, but of our humanity—that the ability to see with wondering eyes is what makes us fully human—is not a thesis for which we merely argue (though we can and will argue for it). It is something we seek to demonstrate by engaging the reader in the kind of participatory vision that we shall be discussing.

Such a hope presents special challenges. How to create a book that can become an occasion for practicing what it preaches, *as it preaches*, is in itself somewhat daunting. It cannot rely on a passive consumption of information or factual material: There will be no dates to memorize. The idea of practiced seeing, that is, of contemplative beholding is not reducible to algorithms. As we said, there can be no simple formula or recipe for living

fully. This is not a study of human nature (in the modern sense of "study"). It is a book about living fully by practicing our humanity every day, where we begin that practice in the very act of experiencing the contents of this book.

Living artfully and philosophically is not the same as taking a philosophy course alongside an art course. It is not an interdisciplinary undertaking, where one operates in two separate departments (or compartments) at once. As we hope the following chapters will help our readers to realize, to live philosophically *is* to live artfully, and *vice versa*.

In his well-known essay on "Self-Reliance," Emerson describes the "primary wisdom" that he calls "intuition":

> In that deep force, the last fact behind which analysis cannot go, all things find their common origin. For, the sense of being which in calm hours rises, we know not how, in the soul, is not diverse from things . . . but one with them, and proceeds obviously from the same source whence their life and being also proceed. We first share the life by which things exist, and afterwards see them as appearances in nature, and forget that we have shared their cause.[7]

Such a passage is far too rich to digest fully in what was intended merely as an "overture" or introduction. A deeper (and, we daresay, uncommon) reading of Emerson's essay will provide the theme for the concluding chapter of this book. But, we should already be able to see how Emerson might join with Sloane in articulating what they take to be our most profound need as human beings—*to recall that sense of connectedness with things, that alone makes it possible to be connected with ourselves*. By drawing on artistic as well as textual sources—sources that, however historically remote, can be seen as still living—we seek not only to identify but also to address this need. We look forward, in other words, to a practical recovery of the intuitive vision to which Emerson so passionately attests. While Emerson's intuition and Thoreau's walking might appear to be very different, as thinking and doing appear to be different, together they help us to realize that it is with the idea of "practice," as preparation and as regular activity, that contemplative seeing becomes everyday. This idea of practice, rooted not only in craft but in the making and beholding of all art, is a form of human work that ultimately connects us in wonder with God's work.

This is what we mean to show in the following chapters. In so doing, we call upon a number of texts not as static entities but as voices with which we are in dialogue—voices that we have, as it were, practiced hearing. We also call upon works of art that we have practiced seeing, in order to demonstrate what this kind of seeing involves, and what it might reveal. In this practice, this returning again and again to the object of admiration, we find one of the most important aspects of contemplative seeing.

An example of this practice is the appreciation of great music. Having heard Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, for instance, one would hardly be justified in saying, "There, I've heard it, I don't need to hear it again." On the contrary, we not only enjoy hearing the piece on other occasions, but find new depth and shadings in the music each time, further defining not only the work itself but also the ways in which we ourselves are changed, deepened, and enriched through our relationship with it. This same process occurs in revisiting Plato's *Republic*, or a painting by Robert Motherwell, or any other great work of art. Indeed, that a work of art provides the occasion for such an experience is perhaps the chief criterion of greatness. This intimate familiarity with a piece of music, a text, or any work of art, born of repeated experience as a daily practice, is a *theōria* in the same sense in which Thoreau's walking is a *theōria*. Such "knowledge" demands and begets full participation. It does not answer any and all questions, but rather moves us to wonder in deeper and deeper ways.

The participatory nature of listening, reading, and seeing is fully akin to the idea of contemplation that will be developed in this book. Contemplative seeing is like "studying" the stars: how they differ and yet remain the same in summer and on cold winter nights, or how they looked when you were four years old and wished upon them, or how, in later life, the heavens appear so much more vast and infinite though one still discerns an undeniable ordering of the cosmos. It is like studying the face of one you love, and how well you recognize that face, because of how often you have seen and *really looked* at it. Seeing that face has meant becoming familiar with its particularities, its unique curves, texture, and luminousness. The more minute the detail, it seems, the greater we cherish the whole person who frames it.

These instances have to do with a very specific way of seeing—the stars across the seasons and throughout your life, your beloved's face in countless times and settings—a way that we believe leads to a unique kind of knowing. This is a theoretical knowing in the original sense, and yet it is also essentially practical in that the visible particulars have been dwelt upon day in and day out . . . a dwelling that is practiced and participatory and, as a result, rich with mystery and fulfillment.

The works that we discuss here are known in this same way. They are texts and images to live with and to love. They are sage and wise. In this book, the reader has the opportunity to be enriched and changed by these works, to be informed in the deepest sense by taking them to heart as we have done. The essays informed by our own encounters with these texts and images form a whole; and yet, each is its own starting point. While they could almost be read separately, they should be read together, with the understanding and willingness to begin again. Through reading and looking at these texts and images, participating in them as spectacles, you may come to know them the way you recognize a much-loved silhouette in the early dawn. In this way, we hope, you may have occasion to practice a way of

living that is filled with insightful beholding and illuminating wonder, with extraordinary awareness and gratitude. As C.S. Lewis writes:

> . . . In reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself . . . I see with myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself and am never more myself than when I do.[8]