

THE ALCHEMICAL COLORS OF ALFONSO OSSORIO

“I feel that all serious art is a repository for the spirit.

I feel if human energy goes into a work of art, sooner or later it radiates back,” said Alfonso Ossorio during his interview in the Archive of American Art



Alfonso Ossorio (1916-1990)
Here and Now, 1963

He continued talking about making art: “This all has to be well done; it has to be a form that can carry the message, a structure that is alive to it.”

Alfonso Ossorio (b. Philippines 1916 - d. New York 1990) was an urbane, uber elite radical. In the late 1950's, he invented new ways to create artistic expression mixing traditional and contemporary art and industrial materials. After seeing an exhibition of his “Congregations” at the [Michael Rosenfeld Gallery](#) in Manhattan, I can say with confidence Ossorio's art work still looks terrific. After 50 years, the structure is still alive.

As a child, Alfonso Ossorio chose to be an artist in a traditional family which considered being an artist a waste of talent. He met every limitation his parents threw at him. "You must remember there's an old Spanish attitude that the arts are not really respectable," he said. He left the Philippines for European then American schools where art and music were intrinsic to the curriculum but not a focus so he found his art teachers among tombstone carvers, calligraphers, chemists and art historian.

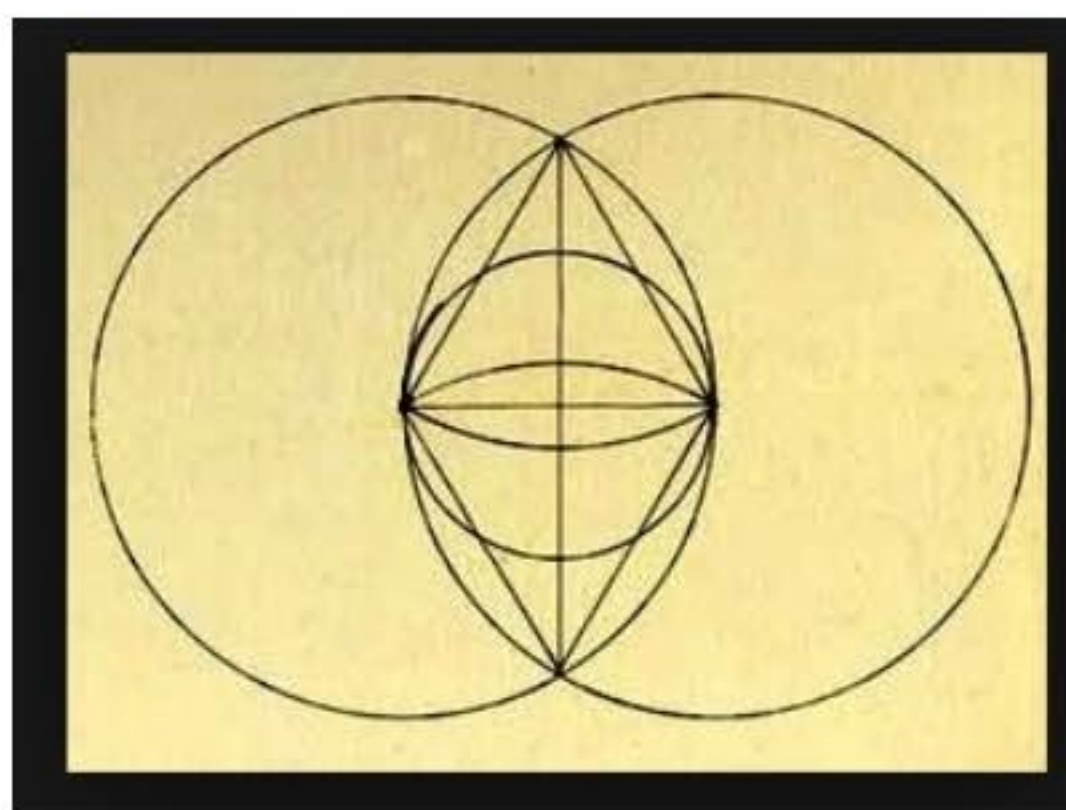
He preferred water media but frequently worked with mixed media such as adding wax to create a wax/water resist. He was an early innovator of using adhesives to extend the picture frame. "I know what I am trying to do ... (and I will) change the rules of the media as far as is necessary to express what I want."



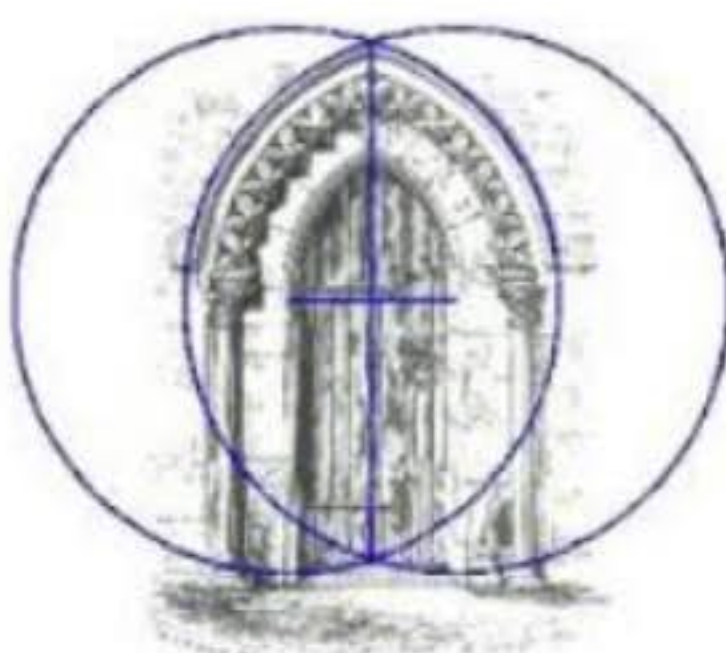
While very experimental with adhesives and binders, Ossorio was less experimental with his color choices. Consciously or unconsciously, every artist selects from millions of colors the human eye can see, usually choosing a limited palette of colors based on an artist's education and experience. In addition to education and experience, an artist can access a certain intuition — an acute visual imagination that can see how to transform materials into a "repository of the spirit."



Generally Ossorio's art work evolved from darkness into lightness enhanced by eye-shaped shells and shapes. Because he took his degree in medieval art at Harvard class of 1938 and was raised pre-Vatican II Roman Catholic, I looked to see if his fundamental color choices were similar to those used by medieval alchemists. Basically, black, white, plus colors in the yellow and red hues are used to represent transformation toward higher consciousness. "Religion is tying together as far as one can certain ultimate verities, in terms of what makes up a human being, what makes up the forces in our existence."



He fused together sacred geometry, especially the vesica piscis (above) with his alchemical color system and his new acrylic media. Vesica piscis represents the eye of god and the seed of life created when two circles join. The mid point on a circle's circumference meets the center point of another circle. At their intersection in perfect balance, a vesica piscis is formed. Through this opening alchemists and artists believe they can channel cosmic energy into the material world. " ...the endless series and spiral of discovery, or the endless enlargement of experience."



The origins of alchemy are murky like the origins of life. Egyptian alchemists mastered the chemical reactions required to inhibit human decay. Their mummies are still with us. What else do you suppose they could do? Medieval alchemists set out to take a look. Their quest was illuminated by the light of classical antiquity, books brought back by crusaders as spoils of war including alchemical and Arabic text plus the teachings of Plato, Aristotle and the Egyptian god of wisdom, Thoth. Alchemists prepared new medicines, produced new colored pigments and other industrial materials at the beginning of the Renaissance.

Alchemy - l (the) kīmiyā (Arabic fr. Greek "art of transmuting metals"), blended with Christianity whose followers also believed in immortality. The transmutation of the soul became an essential part of their efforts to turn the leaden soul into a golden one.



Lead is a base metal, easily available in the earth's crust. Lead is soft and easy to dig up. When bound with other metals into the mineral Galena, lead leaves a dark grey mark.

Galena was used as "kohl," which Egyptians applied around their eyes to reduce glare and repel flies.

Lead can be refined and collected from rocks containing Galena after the rocks have been roasted (calcined) in a fire until the lead drops under the ash. Lead metal can be further processed using ancient technology. Archeologists have discovered lead statues and beads in Anatolia that date back to 6500 BCE. Lead may have been the first metal processed from an ore.

Lead black represents the first step. **"Blackening" is the first alchemical principle.**

Lead can be transformed from a black substance into a white powder, lead carbonate. Just as easily today, lead sheets can be rolled up, placed in jars and dosed with vinegar. Then the uncapped jars are placed in container of rotting organic material or manure (quicker). Seal the container and let nature take her course. A bloom of white transforms lead's blackness into lightness which can easily be scraped off and ground into white pigment with reasonable opacity. Lead white pigment makes a white oil paint that cracks.



"Whitening" represents lightness, integration and awareness of high realms.

The soul's passage is through the darkness into the light on the path to immortality.

Yellow represents the third step of an alchemical transformation. After establishing the values of darkness and lightness, the sun's rays turn lightness into gold.

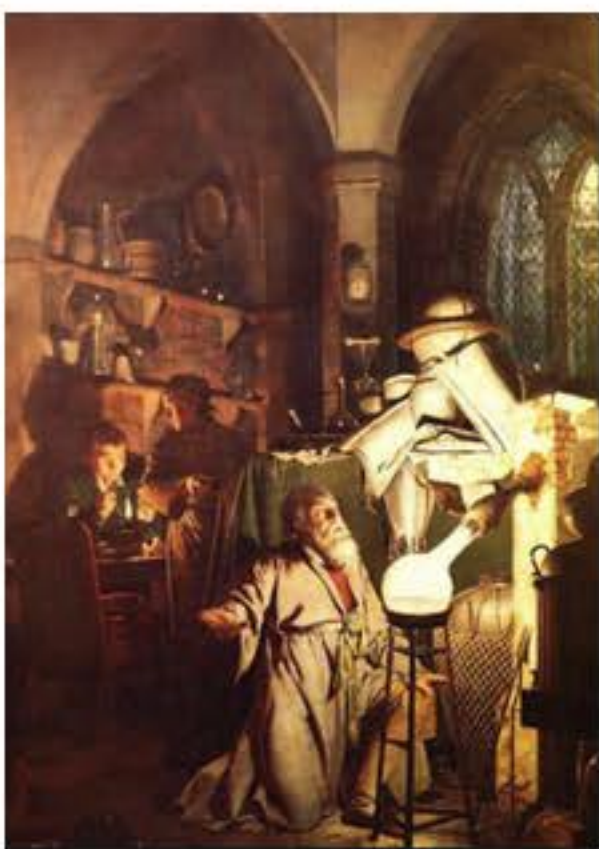
"Yellowing" signifies illumination and inspiration.

Malleable, non tarnishing gold is an exceptional metal because human beings can see it. Gold's frequency oscillations put its color in the human visual spectrum. This is why we can see gold's color and not the color of other metals. Gold is an expensive art material but earth yellows lack brilliance. In antiquity, yellow limonite, an iron based pigments was available. Its color was like "loess," a yellow/grey fine silt found along river banks. The most common yellow color was made from natural iron oxide which appears as yellow/brown veins in the earth. After calcined (roasted) yellow ochre turns reddish. Red iron oxide is blood red, blood of the earth.



Reddening - applying fire and adding a pinch of copper refines gold into the philosopher's stone (Rosey gold) completed the quest for immortality.

The combination of sulfur (golden light) and mercury (fire) when cured via alchemical process produces a dense red pigment, Vermillion. The refining process was a closely guarded secret in Europe and Asia. (Vermillion is an early indicator oil oil painting because it blackens in water media.)



While Ossorio did select colors in the same hues as medieval painters, he did not select the same colors. Rather than rustic muted red iron oxides and dull yellow ochres made before the Industrial Revolution, Ossorio selected modern brighter colors made from naphthol red and hansa yellow pigments which were easily available by mid-20th century in all media.

Even though he preferred water media, Ossorio did succumb for a time to the pressure to paint in oils. Historically there was a prejudice about oil painting being the only media for serious artists. But if an artist does not like the viscosity, in particular, working with oils is a messy struggle. Ossorio remarked: "There was a period of paintings ... with areas in an impasto white lead and oil ... Then slowly objects started to get imbedded into the impasto until I had to make a choice whether I would give up doing this or use a medium that was more suitable ..." His struggle with oil painting somehow inspired his vision and he saw what he wanted to make. He sought out experts such as chemists at Rohm & Haas - the premier manufacturer of acrylic resins, to find the right binder and adhesives needed to create his "Congregations."

First step toward transformation of "disagreeable bits" of shells, stones, bones and shards plus beads and mirrors into an integrated whole requires precise alchemical processing: the artist identifies what needs to be transformed.



Second: he needs to select a vessel to contain the alchemical reaction.

He said, "...there's an inner rectangular — free form, that breaks out of that frame. In that sense it is a series of framing and breaking out of frame and continuing the growth, the endless series and spiral of discovery, or the endless enlargement of experience."





“... in the sense of total enrichment who does the artist work for. He’s working to pull together and then give back as much as he can ... creating a new myth, a new ethos ... and incorporating as much as he can out of this so-called fragmented civilization.”



More from the Master Alfonso Ossorio at :<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-alfonso-ossorio-5517>.

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Yellow represents the third step of an alchemical transformation.

“Yellowing” - by absorbing the sun’s rays, illumination and inspiration to turn lightness into gold.

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Reddening- by applying fire (and adding a pinch of copper) refining gold into the philosopher’s stone (Rosey gold) completing the quest for immortality.

While Ossorio did select the same hues as the ancients, he did not select the same colors. Rather than the rustic muted red iron oxides and dull yellow ochres made before the Industrial Revolution, Ossorio selected modern brighter colors made from a new more lightfast pigment, most likely Naphthol Red and Hansa Yellow which were just available in acrylic paints when he started his “Congregations” project.

Art Construction Management Inc. offers technical advice to painters on art materials and their applications. The company was established by Martha Bergman, a founder of Gamblin Artists Colors Co., as another way to assist painters master their materials. Martha is an expert on how to span the distance between what an artist wants to do and what the art materials will allow her/him to do.

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