

THE SHAMAN AND THE ARTIST

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I have completed and filed the original term paper in art history in the Art Department office and I have given a copy to the course instructor.

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## PREFACE

To the artists with integrity, I celebrate your  
bravery.

To the shaman who still listens to the spirit world, I  
dance with you.

To those who have not yet recognized their gifts, I  
dream for you.

I have been enlightened for having seen the world  
through the eyes of

Kathe Kollwitz: Printmaker, Mother, Wife;

Magdalena Abakanowicz: Innovator, Fiber Artist, Wife;

The Eskimo Artist: Celebrator of the power of the  
Shaman.

## INTRODUCTION

While looking at art for and about shaman, I began to realize how interconnected it was to other forms of art. The artist who is true to his or her talents has the power to do many of the things a shaman is called to do. I am not suggesting this in the sense of witchcraft or negatives, but in the sense of healing, finding answers, enlightening, and guiding.

Kathe Kollwitz and Magdalena Abakanowicz are two artists who I feel best express the qualities I see in the artifacts and art about shaman. There is a directness in their expression. It is not overworked or overdecorated. It simply states, "This is what I am about."

In this paper I will briefly discuss the history of the shaman, and the art of Kathe Kollwitz and Magdalena Abakanowicz, and how these are interrelated.

## THE SHAMAN AND THE ARTIST

Shamanism is the religion of certain peoples based on a belief of good and evil spirits who can be influenced only by the shamans.

The word shaman is both singular and plural.

It is said the shaman came because of the greater need of mankind. Man was uncertain about how to contend with increasingly difficult circumstances.<sup>1</sup>

The shaman can be self-chosen. He or she can decide on their own that they have what is needed to be a powerful shaman. They can take themselves through the required processes necessary to become a shaman. Different cultures have varying requirements. One is that the shamans have a vision which should help people find their power source. This can be done through fasting, a self-induced coma, or a dream.

A person can become a shaman through suffering. The suffering can come in many forms. Most often it is related to a serious emotional or physical illness, such as the survival of smallpox or damage to the nerves or the back. Some believe a person is predestined to be a shaman, and signs at birth or as the person grows will make this fact known. Finally, a descendant can become a shaman because the mother or father is or was a shaman or one or both of the grandparents was a shaman. It is expected. It is tradition.<sup>2</sup>

The shaman has the power to be both good and evil. "In the Polynesian culture the word Mana is used to mean spiritual power. In our culture we might use the term grace and in China the word is Pi. The word Noa in the Polynesian culture means no power or not negative."<sup>3</sup> In



the Siberian sub-cultures the term white shaman is the term used for positive power and the term black shaman is the term used for negative or evil power.<sup>4</sup> Often cultures or tribes will have both a black and a white shaman. Many shaman have both the white and black power. "The shaman has many roles: mediator, problem solver, curer (healer)."<sup>5</sup>

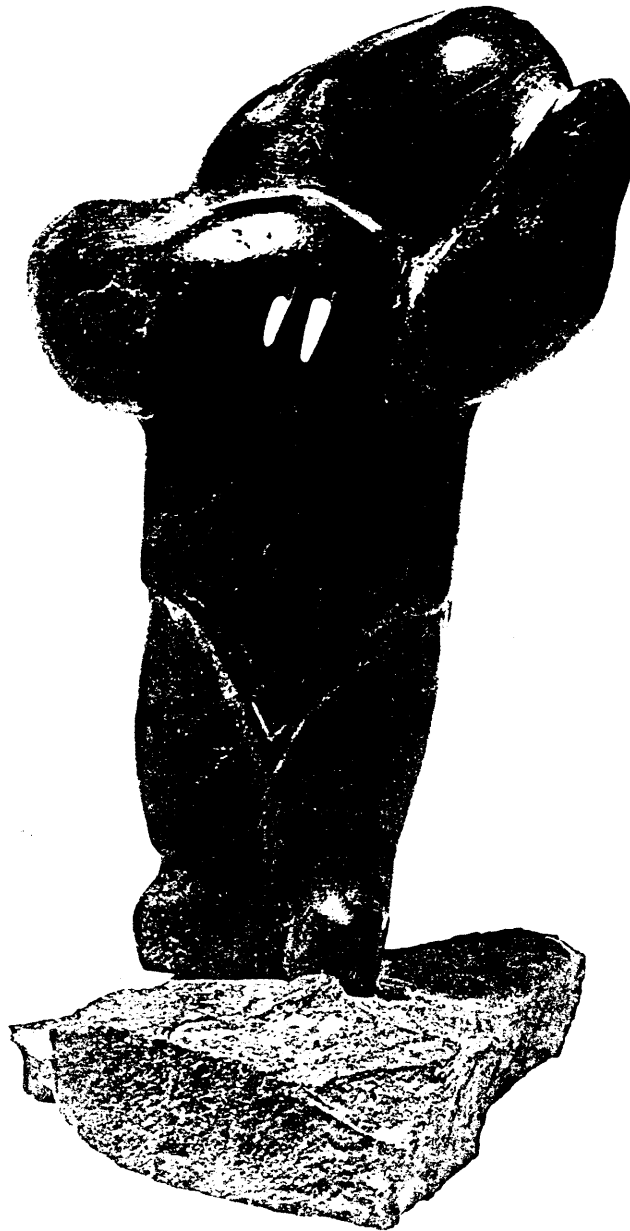
"An artist is a shaman whose work is infused with unknown powers."<sup>6</sup> The artist often does not know all of his or her strengths. It is a mystery often seen more clearly by the viewer, or else when months or years after the artist has completed a work, he/she will recognize the power of his/her own message.

All artists do not have this power. All artists are not completely honest nor do they recognize their abilities and reasons for needing to create.

"It is the artist who speaks with a healthy truth, who isn't trying to deceive, that has the power of Shaman. It is precisely those artists involved in the most naked projections of their personalities who will contribute most to society's comprehension of itself."<sup>7</sup>

The art of the shaman often deals with transformation. To be a shaman one takes on a new personality or some other power. Female Shaman Transforming Herself, (pre-1919) (p. 6), is a good example, in sculptural form, of this Eskimo belief in the Eskimo culture. Eskimos believe that

31. FEMALE SHAMAN TRANSFORMING  
HERSELF, pre-1969  
VITAL MAKPAAQ 1922-1978  
Baker Lake  
dark grey stone and bone  
18.4 x 15.5 x 11.5  
Private collection, Winnipeg  
123.78



a shaman can become an animal or absorb the spirit of that animal. In this particular piece you can see the teeth the shaman has her hand on. Teeth are often used in shaman ceremony to suggest transformation. This sculpture is beautiful in its simplicity, with the emphasis on the act of transforming. The quiet beauty of the stone and flowing movement of the arm are two especially attractive qualities.

In many cultures, the transformation of a shaman is generally associated with the performance or seance in which the helping spirit had entered the shaman's body and spoken through him (or her). "When the spirit had entered the shaman's body, it was his (or her) voice that spoke, not the shaman's."<sup>8</sup>

The spirit voice of the artist is the voice that has seen, experienced, responded. It is the voice of grief, laughter, loss, renewal. It is political. It is personal. It is seeking. It is the power to visually communicate what the artist sees and feels, that, like the shaman, mediates, solves, cures (heals). "I believe the artist has been given the third eye, god's fingerprint."<sup>9</sup> Another term for this is the sixth sense, that which allows the artist to see and feel more clearly, more intensely.

The shaman, when called upon for his powers, often takes time to prepare for the ritual related to that specific request. He will often have masks or special

clothes. The artist wears only the title of artist. If the artist is serious about the title and accepts the responsibility, he must understand the invisible cloak is heavily weighted with mystery and demands honesty.

The art of Kathe Kollwitz and Magdalena Abakanowicz seems to best express this theory. They share similar backgrounds and their art has a global quality. It speaks in many tongues.

### Kathe Kollwitz

Kathe (Katya) Kollwitz was born in the industrial city of Koningsburg, in what is now East Germany. Her father was a successful stone mason who had been educated in law. The family lived in a large home and seemingly had all the material things necessary for a comfortable life. Kathe was influenced by a stoic, unaffectionate mother and two men, both liberal thinkers and both concerned for the needs of others.

Kathe's mother was undemonstrative (stoic). Kathe never saw her mother lose control. She spoke of watching her mother as Kathe's brother lay dying. There was no outward response to this situation from her mother. In spite of the lack of cuddling, Kathe said she felt the home was a safe place and there was love. More specifically, Kathe said her growing-up home "had a blessed atmosphere."<sup>10</sup>

Kathe's father was quite approachable, unlike in most German homes where the patriarchal system was firmly practiced. He encouraged all of his children to learn and understand much and was very supportive of a career in art for Kathe. He was a thinker somewhat beyond his time, and introduced his children to the philosophy of socialism, "but, a socialism understood as the much-desired Brotherhood of Man."<sup>11</sup>

Her grandfather Rupp was also a strong influence on Kathe's personality and ideas. He was a teacher and a minister, the founder of a new denomination, "The Friends of Light."<sup>12</sup> He was sent to prison for his involvement with this group, but later released. Julius Rupp died when Kathe was just seventeen, but he had by then made a profound influence on her. More than once she mentioned his beautiful hands. His hands as well as the stoic female image of her mother appear often in her art.

As a young teen, Kathe was allowed to wander about the city with her sister, Lise. Kathe's favorite spot was the dock area where the Jimkes,<sup>13</sup> Russians or Lithuanians, worked. They dressed in sheepskin and rags. Their strong appearance and their ability to find small joys in spite of their working conditions helped her recognize her love for beauty without superficiality. Years later she states, "The Proletariat had a grandness of manner, a breadth to their lives."<sup>14</sup> In Lucy Lippard's Overlay, Jack Burham

speaks about the shaman in a way that relates to Kollwitz's vision: "The Shamanistic function magnifies every human gesture until it assumes archetypal or collective importance."<sup>15</sup>

Kollwitz's first formal art training was with a copper engraver by the name of Rudolph Mauer. She first studied drawing with him and then he later introduced her to etching and intaglio printing. Kathe followed her brother, Konrad, to Berlin. He was a student of Social Democratic politics and she was a student of Karl Stauffer-Bern, painter, etcher, sculptor, and poet. She studied at the School for Women Artists. While in Berlin, she was introduced to the artist, Max Klinger. Both he and Stauffer-Bern had a profound effect on Kollwitz as an artist.

Her brother, Konrad, also took her to hear the writer, August Bebel, who felt women should have an equal place in society, supporting Kollwitz's own beliefs on this issue. At her brother's encouragement, she also read Karl Marx.

In 1889, Kollwitz was sent to Munich to study. This was more her father's choice than her own. He did not want her to marry early and perhaps give up her chances of ever succeeding as an artist. Much of her time in Munich was spent in the company of other women artists who frequently discussed the issue of women having careers. By the time she did marry Karl Kollwitz, Kathe was a decided feminist. She and Karl had an agreement that she would have her

career as well as marriage and family. By the end of the First World War, Kollwitz was not only a confirmed feminist, but a confirmed pacifist as well. She had lost her youngest son, Peter, to war and she considered war a great waste.

The German Secessionists invited Kollwitz to show with them over a number of years and finally invited her to become a member of their group. She did not like to be labeled and it is difficult to categorize her into an art "ism."

#### Magdalena Abakanowicz

"The Polish countryside was the early home of Magdalena Abakanowicz. The house where she was born was great and rambling. In spite of the grandness, she was often lonely and in need of her mother's acceptance. Her curiosity allowed her some escape and introduced her to the world of natural materials, sticks and stones. That experimental time, that child-time search, is most apparent in her art. Sticks and stones are friends of mine, but words, they constant harm me.

Magdalena Abakanowicz's mother wanted a son when Magda was born. Her father did not like children's noise. As mentioned, she spent much of her time alone, wandering the multitude of acres belonging to her very wealthy family. She was six when her parents brought a teacher for her.

Because of her many years of being alone, formal learning was alien and uncomfortable. She felt she belonged with nature and would often hide in the woods.

Like Kathe Kollwitz, Abakanowicz lived with the atrocities of war. Her mother's arm was shot off by German soldiers as the young girl watched. Abakanowicz said she became her mother's lost appendage at this time, but does not say whether their relationship ever became resolved.

Later the family had to flee to Warsaw, leaving behind their aristocratic life. A statement made by Abakanowicz about this time is quite revealing: "As our home and the countryside receded I felt increasingly hollow as if my insides had been removed and the exterior, unsupported by anything, shrank, losing its form."<sup>16</sup> Through reading this quote, many of Abakanowicz's sculptural pieces come to mind. For example, when she says "unsupported" and "hollow," Embryology and Head are recalled, as well as the larger than life Abakans.

Her life in Warsaw was quite different. The family had no frivolities, no extras. They barely existed. Her parents sold papers on street corners. At school she felt an outsider in old clothes and shoes. The children of Warsaw had not yet been affected by World War II.

As the war continued, she speaks of being more involved with the horrors and of helping care for the wounded. She said, "One could only escape from human



cruelty inside oneself into a world of dreams, imaginings, and I learned it was necessary to cover carefully the traces of these flights."<sup>17</sup>

At this time Abakanowicz was beginning to work with cloth because she could hide it under her bed. Kollwitz was in Germany making her last lithograph and grieving the loss of a second Peter, her grandson, who died in war. They both were forced to see, to experience firsthand, the atrocities which Hitler and his goons inflicted upon the artists' world.

Abakanowicz was eventually able to go to the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. As with her first experience with formal learning, she again felt frustration in the confines of the academic setting. She said, "I did not want to be taught."<sup>18</sup>

Having little money, she invented many ways to survive: how to eat, where to live, how to work. Finally, graduating, she took a position in a garment factory and then returned to the academy. She left the academy a second time when someone tried to teach her traditional weaving.

Abakanowicz spent the next several years weaving in Maria Lasykiewicz's basement. Lasykiewicz is the person who encouraged Abakanowicz to enter the International Biennial of Tapestry to which she was accepted even though

Lasykiewicz was not. This acceptance into the Biennial was the beginning of Abakanowicz's international recognition.

The acceptance into the Biennial in 1962 was a strong beginning for Abakanowicz. However, it took some time for the world to accept her interpretation of tapestry. She was a leader in the field of fiber art, bringing about a change in the way in which people felt about textiles: the craft versus art syndrome.

Abakanowicz, like Kollwitz, is difficult to place into an artistic school or movement. Her work was radical and new in its beginnings, and she can be thought of as a leader in the field of textiles.

Art of the Eskimo, Kollwitz,  
and Abakanowicz

When looking at art works by Eskimo artists interpreting the idea of shaman and works by Kollwitz and Abakanowicz, a connectedness can be seen which is the realization that comes from the artists' strong sense of history. There are many stories. The artists have been exposed to the history of those who came before, of their own history, and the history yet to be. An understanding of the past gives them a sense of the future. These artists have been exposed to life's grimmest realities and have discovered a form of expression to allow them to retell their stories, to survive, to move on.

Coming and Going of the Shaman (p. 16), Mother with Dead Child (p. 17), and Pregnant (p. 18) are all textural and have a sense of an inner being, a core. They have a strong emotional character without the need of an abundance of other decoration.

Coming and Going of the Shaman reaches toward the viewer physically and reaches into the viewer emotionally. The dual heads are suggestive of the transformation of the shaman. The head to the left is more knowing and the head to the right is more questioning in its expression. The enlarged hand at once seems frightening but at the same time speaks of the importance of the need for touch in the healing process.

Mother with Dead Child expresses through textural, continuous, sensual line the rawness of emotion that is indeed universal. Anyone who has felt great love or passion for another should have some depth of understanding of where this piece was born. There is a basic animal quality similar to the way one might experience a shaman dance. The artist has stripped away all pretensions. Like the shaman, the artist heals through expression, not through the physical act of touch or dance, but through the physical act of drawing. Her marks pulled from the depths of her psyche help to free the spirit: to love, to hate, to grieve, to forgive.

7. COMING AND GOING OF THE  
SHAMAN, c. 1973  
KAROO ASHEVAK 1940-1974  
Spence Bay  
whalebone, antler and stone  
38.5 x 26.6 x 29.1  
George Sutherland, Spence Bay





Mother with Dead Child

Figs. 100, 101 *Pregnant 1981-82* (cat. no. 84)



Pregnant seems full, ready to explode as the title would suggest. One can almost feel a pulse. It also has another quality, that of memory, of something of the past. It is also reminiscent of the Peruvian mummy bundles, where the fibers are wrapped around and around to hold something very old and special. Pregnant seems ready to offer us something very new, and at the same time holds knowledge of something very old. It, like the shaman, is full of old wisdoms from other generations. It is like a leaf in the fall that dries and reveals the skeleton of its former self. At the same time, it suggests newness, renewal, breath.

The next series consists of pieces which are all masks or mask-like. The qualities in each that makes them seem of one mind is again textural and the directness of the expression.

Mask (p. 20), simply called, has many scars. The scars in turn give Mask a textural quality and a suggestion of much use. The marks both intentionally and unintentionally add depth to its simple, direct design. The sheen on the wood reminds one of a membrane. It is as if the outer layer of skin has been peeled away to reveal or to expose something closer to the soul or psyche. It is liquid, shiny, and revealing. The expression on this mask is questioning and searching. The eyes seem to squint as if they are thoroughly surveying what they see.

## 128. MASK

Point Hope, Alaska

wood and paint

21.5 x 19.0 x 9.0

Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago

221.78





Self-Portrait (p. 22), by Kathe Kollwitz, looks directly at the viewer. The left eye seems to pierce the viewer. The right eye seems to see everything else, sadly so. The texture of this print gives it a fibrous quality. The white areas are large, deep, and purposefully placed. Like Mask, it has the appearance of having had the skin peeled away revealing muscle and membrane. It, too, shines, or perhaps a better term would be glows. Taking away the layers of pretense allows the artist and the viewer a clearer understanding of the message.

Like the shaman seeking a way to heal, Kollwitz seeks a way to heal, in this instance, a self-healing. Her face is the face of the proletarian face she saw and drew. "Portraying," she said, "again and again opened a safety-valve for me; it made life bearable."<sup>19</sup> It seems as we try to understand others and their struggles, as do the shaman and the artist, we develop a better understanding of ourselves.

Magdalena Abakanowicz has, like the other two mask makers, stripped away layers in The Center (p. 23). It has in it suggestions of a face, but the highly textural surface also suggests how everything is interconnected. When one looks at The Center, there are veins, nerves, muscle, twisting, turning, pumping, along with relationships--with one--and with another. It has a ceremonial quality. A shaman could use it. It has mystery and knowing. Like

104. Self-portrait, front view, 1923



Fig. 150 *The Center* 1976 (cat. no. 66)



the other two masks, it seems also to question the viewer. Looking at The Center produces a sense of calm. It does not frighten as some masks do. If Abakanowicz believes in the soul, this must be for her where it is kept.

In the third series of art selections, the common unifying force is again texture. But, secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the pieces have a strength, a look of self-containment.

The Eskimo carving, simply titled pre-1912 (p. 25), I will call "Sagay Kam."<sup>20</sup> Sagay Kam appears strong, looking straight ahead or straight into the eyes of the recipient of power. Sagay Kam (shaman) seems also sad with all his knowledge. The arm reaching around to his side suggests an act of pulling inward. The carving, Sagay Kam, has a sense of completeness. The texture of the wood, the wearing away of the shape and the color, suggests that Sagay Kam was used many times. This small object has great power.

The Mothers (p. 26), by Kathe Kollwitz, are woven together, arms and bodies interconnected, bound by their emotions as a unit of one. They are spiritually of the same texture. They are sure and calm. No one will take away their most precious belongings--their sons. The shaman asks the one he comes to heal, "What is it you need, where do you hurt?" Kathe Kollwitz asks what it is these women need, and then draws it out for all to see. This group of women appears to be involved in a trance dance.

56. FIGURE, pre-1912  
Sledge Island, Alaska  
wood, quartz, metal and paint  
43.5 x 10.2 x 7.8  
The University Museum,  
University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia  
043.78



91. *War*, leaf 6: *The Mothers*, 1922-23



They are turning slowly, around and around, chanting, "no seeds, no seeds, no seeds." They are facing out, challenging, calling to the viewer, "stop war, stop war, stop war." But not even the power in Kollwitz's hand and eye could stop the worst of the Black Shaman, Hitler, from using his negative power. The chant fell on deaf ears.

Back (p. 28), by Abakanowicz, is alone, humped, and pulled in to itself. Does it pray? Is it asking for strength? Or, does it simply pull away out of fear of what it has seen? Do we, the viewers, pull away from what we see in it? The Back is beautiful in its simplicity. The self-contained form, the exquisite textures, help make it powerful. It is manifold. It is like the shaman pulling in, clearing the way for a new vision. One can see the Navaho woman seated, waiting. She has gone to the shaman for a healing. She sits alone in the midst of a sand-painting and waits for the ceremony, the healing. She is bare from the waist up, waiting for health, emotional or physical or both--it is not known. The Back, seen by many, evokes as many stories. It waits, watches, listens, hears, weeps, screams.

Fig. 83 *Back 1976/82 (cat. no. 71)*





## CONCLUSION

The art about the Alaskan shaman and the art of Kathe Kollwitz and Magdalena Abakanowicz have a common thread. It speaks in a universal tongue. If the viewer takes time to look and compare, he/she will connect with the similar or identical messages found in these works. The art of these three moves beyond the everyday into a world we do not always want to go, because it forces us to face who we are at a particular moment in time. If we want to grow and develop in a positive sense, then these are the issues we must face at some time in our lives. They are issues of health, social responsibility, political stance, etc. Each of the artists represented are to be respected for their bravery in stripping away the pretenses and dealing directly with an issue.

Artists have within themselves the power to directly commune with the viewer. This is probably the strongest power of the shaman, to directly commune with one in need. Those people who have recognized their abilities to communicate to the public through the visual arts need to use this strength to their advantage, with conscience and integrity.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Jean Blodgett, Coming and Going of the Shaman, Eskimo Shamanism and Art (Ottawa, Canada: Canadian Artic Producers, 1979), p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> Velmos Dio S'zegi, Tracing Shamans in Siberia (The Netherlands: Anthropological Publications, 1968), p. 54.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Francis W. Denning, Jr., ABD, Anthropology teacher, University of Northern Colorado, 12 years, research in Ethnic Minorities. Nellie M. Denning, MA, Social Science, Curator of Education, University of Northern Colorado Museum of Anthropology, 1972-1982, May 1988.

<sup>4</sup> Dio S'zegi, p. 43.

<sup>5</sup> Blodgett, p. 38.

<sup>6</sup> Hunter Drohojowska, "Magical Mystery Tours," Art News, 84 (September 1985), p. 108.

<sup>7</sup> Jack Burnham, Great Western Salt Works (New York: George Braziller, 1974); quoted in Lucy R. Lippard, Overlay (New York: Random House, Inc., 1983), p. 47.

<sup>8</sup> Blodgett, p. 75.

<sup>9</sup> Cecilio Garcia-Camarillo and Mia Kalavinka, "Stones, Bones, and Skin," Artscanada, 184 (December 1973-January 1974), p. 165.

<sup>10</sup> Martha Kearns, Kathe Kollwitz: Woman and Artist (New York: The Feminist Press, 1976), p. 27.

<sup>11</sup> Otto Nagel, Kathe Kollwitz (New York: New York Graphic Society, 1971), p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> Kearns, p. 16.

<sup>13</sup> Kearns, p. 113.

<sup>14</sup> H. Arthur Klein and Mina C. Klein, Kathe Kollwitz: Life in Art (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1972).

<sup>15</sup>Burnham, Lippard, p. 142.

<sup>16</sup>John Hallmark Neff, et al., Abakanowicz (New York: Abbeville Press, 1982), p. 27.

<sup>17</sup>Neff, p. 30.

<sup>18</sup>Neff, p. 32.

<sup>19</sup>Kearns, p. 107.

<sup>20</sup>Dio S'zegi, p. 54.

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