



Notes in Play When Considering

Calcolare Caelo | BY JOHN MCDOWELL

Note to the Reader: You will notice that the following article unfolds in a series of numbered sections. You will also note, possibly with some puzzlement, that the numbers are not in sequence. Surely, it must be an error on the part of the author or editor. I assure you that this is not the case. A sequential sequence provides an expected order. Try the unexpected. I invite you to create your own sequence, your own order. The order you create will provide (I assure you) a slightly different shade and tone of meaning when you are done than if you had chosen another route.

4. Title

The art featured on the cover of this issue of *Spectrum* has as its title, *Calcolare Caelo*. A colleague, much better versed in Latin than I, suggested that a more correct rendering of “Calculate Heaven” is: *Caelum Calcula*. Why Latin? I am referencing the language (in the Western tradition) of learning, scholarship, inquiry in the sciences and humanities.

9. Quotation

“Only imaginative vision elicits the possibilities that are interwoven within the texture of the actual.”¹

3. Process

Tarpaper backs rolls of copper flashing. With a propane torch, I burn off most of the paper and some of the tar. The bits of paper that remain, small, burnt ovals, are eventually covered

with gold leaf. I apply a high-temperature silicone to the plywood and adhere lengths of copper to the base. I also attach a strip of lead. Once secured, I use the torch as a drawing tool to burn off more tar. Thus begins a process of uncovering and covering. I blur the horizontal lines where the copper pieces line up. The challenge: create a pattern that works with

the horizontal strips and makes the space work. The “burnt” areas, cleaned with steel wool, are ready for the application of various chemicals. Once the chemicals (in liquid form) are applied, I place the painting on a bed of wood shavings coated with household ammonia (this brings out blue hues) and place the piece in a fume tent for several days. This creates the patina. While waiting, I weld the metal frame together. Once removed from the fume tent, I inspect



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the piece of coloration and “paint” again by removing material in some spots and redoing the patina process in other places. I also add dashes of powdered pigment (the reds for example). Once happy with the patina, I remove the wood chips and attach the frame. The patina, at this point, is fragile (it takes time for it to bite and bind with the copper), and some comes off—thus the task begins to apply sizing (glue) in some areas, and dyes in other areas to bring out

and strengthen the colors I want. (I work with a small brush and even cotton swabs.) Once I have the color and composition of the copper I desire (there is often revision), I work with the lead strip—the “blackboard” (or horizon line)—and with transfer paper apply the formulas and symbols. The final step involves applying layers of clear lacquer to stabilize and harden the surface.

8. Quotation

“To interpret is to try to see in things what is distinctly their own. That is in turn to see them in ways that are distinctly our own and, to the extent that they are ours alone, these ways of seeing turn out to be aesthetic features in their own right and have themselves a claim to beauty....”²

5. Formulas

With their numbers, signs, and symbols, formulas have a wonderful beauty. New insight is achieved via balance. There is a journey from the known to the unknown. A river (“=”) must be crossed. The coins paid are *not* to the boatman of the river Styx. No, the opposite is true. The coin paid is the stretch of the imagination. When things equate, and we cross over, we step into the paradise of new knowledge; the unknown becomes known in ways we might have thought impossible, yet here we stand agape in awe in a new world of understanding. (The formulas depicted relate to motion, planetary movement, and aspects of astronomy.)

1. Quotation

“Works of art are means by which we enter, through imagination and the emotions they evoke, into other

forms of relationship and participation than our own.”³

2. Idea

Coming to meaning means the continuous process of translating what our senses receive, and how we read the symbols we have created as tools to investigate: to know. The calculation of heaven is the supreme exercise of the continuously informed imagination. (I speak here both literally and metaphorically.)

11. Quotation

“Admire me is the sub-text of so much of our looking; the demand put on art that it should reflect the reality of the viewer. The true painting, in its stubborn independence, cannot do this, except coincidentally. Its reality is imaginative not mundane.”⁴

6. Science and Art

As disciplines, science and art are often constructed in a dualistic, paradigmatic construction and hence our understanding of reality is broken into separate polar entities for investigating and even determining truth. We even talk of science and art as inhabiting different areas of the brain (a fallacy). I chafe against dualist categorizations. How much more can be gained if both science and art are understood as partners? Beauty informing empirical data, empirical analysis informing beauty. The circulating, reciprocal is the way: science and art, us and the world, the mortal and the immortal. Surely, calculating heaven is both/and.

10. Quotation

“Art does not imitate nature, it imitates a creation, sometimes to propose an alternate world, sometimes simply

to amplify, to confirm, to make social the brief hope offered by nature.... Art sets out to transform the potential recognition into an unceasing one. It proclaims man in the hope of receiving a surer reply... the transcendental face of art is always a form of prayer.”⁵

7. Viewing

What do you see? (When you look?)

12. Poem

The heavens are telling—

*We
shall not
be excised
from*

the story.

John McDowell is a poet, artist, and professor,



and the dean of arts at Canadian University College. His poetry and photography have been featured on past *Spectrum*

covers, and his essays have appeared in the journal. His bio, artwork, and contact information can be found at jmcowellart.com.

References

1. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1958), 345.
2. Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007), 132.
3. Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1958), 333.
4. Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1996), 10.
5. John Berger, *The Sense of Sight* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 9.