

THE SHADOW

“La Sombre”

BY

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What is this thing called a shadow, this thing that contains within itself many layers of meaning onto a flat surface?

Its many shapes and flexible nature has such a presence without being an object. What is it? Archetypal and metaphorical by nature it simply urges one to look beyond the standard scientific explanation.

Constantin Brancusi took a photograph of an egg in 1920 and the lighting, forms and shapes is a classic example of a shadow existing as a result of light being stopped by an object and mirroring the shape of that object, at times distancing and stretching it a little.

This description is what we are most familiar with.



Constantin Brancusi
The origin of the World, c 1920

Truth lies hidden inside this metaphor which we have come to recognise and label “the shadow”.

I have looked at the shadow through the eyes of William Kentridge and then went back in history as per the exhibition in Spain called “La Sombre” where the shadow was identified from the Renaissance, Baroque, Romanticism, Symbolism, Impressionism, Modern Realist movement, Surrealism and I end with Andy Warhol in the 70’s.

I discuss how the shadow changed throughout history yet at times had hidden threads through the ages. I weave the philosophies of Plato and Carl Jung into some of the meaning of the shadow. And finally, in summarising, I question the shadow in my own work.

This research clarified for me the vast and differing aspects and issues raised by the shadow and I attempted to reveal its meanings.

Perhaps the very first philosopher to have ever written anything on the shadow was Plato.

William Kentridge draws a parallel with his production of Mozart's "Magic Flute" and Plato's "The Republic – the allegory of the cave." (The Black Box pg 45)

Firstly, both stories have to do with the movement from darkness into light, in a metaphorical sense, in that light is equated to understanding under a revelation of sorts.

In Mozart's opera, the main character Tamino, a young prince, is told by the Queen of the night that an evil magician, Sarastro, has abducted her daughter, Pamina. Tamino goes off to rescue Pamina and endures many trials. The antithesis comes with the revelation that Sarastro was not the baddy but indeed rescuing Pamina from the mother who is the evildoer. This revelation is enhanced by Kentridge's technical use of lighting in the final episode. Once enlightened Tamino understands and Kentridge uses light on to the stage to reinforce this concept.

Plato writes of a similar scenario in which a group of prisoners are chained inside a dark cave so that they can only look forward at a wall. Behind them is a wall behind which is a fire. In front of the fire walk people carrying objects above their heads. The prisoners can only see the shadows of the objects which seem to move on their own. This coupled with their trapped physical state, can be frightening. Plato then asks us to imagine unshackling the prisoner and forcing him/her outside toward the light where revelation brings upon understanding that the shadows are not threatening objects.

Both stories are full of the metaphor of moving out of darkness into light. Mozart is re-creating, in opera form, the parable Plato tells in the Republic. There is a strong element of coercion here and Kentridge refers to it. The artist wishes to impart revelation reflecting our multifaceted society within which we are connected beings having individual fingerprints. Information can lead one from ignorance towards knowledge and justice.

The second process once this enlightenment occurs is that the viewer will go out and enlighten others. This second process fulfils Plato's allegory. According to him, once you've looked at the sun and understood the good and the true, then it is your duty to go back down the cave to find the other people still in darkness and lead them – forcibly if necessary – into the light.

As an artist Kentridge does this very well. The audience is held captive within the theatre and he brings to their awareness the violence within man and politics. Indeed Kentridge's work, the "Black Box" is all about the massacre of the Herero tribe, ordered by a particular government in history. Kentridge's stage production parallels Plato's cave experience when the prisoners witness a projection of images and when the audience witnesses the horror of history. The artist poses this question, a provocative one. What is it that one learns from the shadows, from being down in the cave? Is it possible to bring about enlightenment by force?

When Kentridge was working on the Magic Flute and Black Box, two views of "forced Seeing" is apparent. In Magic Flute Sarastro kidnaps the princess so that she can see and understand her mother is evil. In Black Box, one sees the horror of an order given by a dictator imposing what he felt was for the good of ideals yet one sees what follows was extraordinary violence and destruction.

Kentridge plays with illuminating shadows. If you have an image and a shadow across it, you invert what is light and what is dark, and the shadow itself functions as a kind of spotlight.

Kentridge cleverly uses shadows projected on a screen behind the performers and at times on them to add meaning to the content of the opera.



William Kentridge
Shadow of Pamina and Monostatos, The Magic Flute, La Monnaie, Brussels 2005

If one looks through the books of the Black Box and The Magic flute, one is struck by the absolute simplicity of the shadowed shapes, cut up and worked on, providing more than enough information for the viewer to be able to understand his message.



William Kentridge

Process of paper puppets in artist's studio during the development of Black Box – Chambre Noir, 2005

Within the contemporary context, Kentridge uses the shadow to add meaning to his work. He talks about Plato's idea of bringing people into enlightenment by informing them. He does this through the use of theatre and art. He uses the shadow as a tool to exemplify his ideas, to add meaning to the theatre piece.

Kentridge reminds us in his texts that children play games with shadows. They make shapes with their hands and, for instance, a projected image of a bird appears on a flat surface. Firstly, one understands that one's hand has intercepted light and created a dark patch on the wall. Secondly, one recognises the shape and labels it – a bird. Thirdly, one derives pleasure from this self-deception. The child who plays with shadows delights with watching and grasping the illusion. One's mind continuously seeks to construct meaning, seeks to make sense of shapes and it is in this discovery that one feels stirred, excited and alive.

This research led me to an exhibition held in Spain, Madrid last year 10 February to 17 May at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza and Fundación Caja, Madrid. It was called La Sombre – "THE SHADOW"

It is said to be one of the first major exhibitions on the depiction of the projected shadow in western art. The two museums collected about 140 works in order to highlight and deepen the wide range of implications, issues and solutions generated by the representation of the shadow in art from the Renaissance to today. Each room represented a period in history.

The fact that it was the Spanish that put together an exhibition of this nature, I found fascinating. It is a known trait that the Latin culture, and I include myself here, has a great interest in looking back with nostalgia at their history, of love lost and desires vanished.

Portugal (my own root) the country next door, contains within its culture a lamenting type of song alluding to these traits called “the fado”.

I have chosen a couple of images from each section that I felt in any way excited or fed into my own use of the shadow in my artwork and which represented the different renderings of the shadow or united similarities across the ages.

Before looking at the artwork, I needed to establish for myself, what the shadow meant psychologically. And for this I looked no further than the father of this term – Dr Carl Jung. It was in the 1930’s that Jung wrote about the psyche being divided into three parts. The personal, collective unconscious and Archetypes. One of these archetypes for him was the shadow, uniting similarities across the ages.

But there is a side of the dark shadow that is not highlighted. As much as the shadow in psychology is represented by the negative stuff one wishes to keep hidden, fearful of judgement from peers and society should they bring it out, the shadow, accordingly to Jung is ninety percent “Gold”. According to an article in Indigo Sun in August 1999 by Rebecca Gigen, we project our most positive qualities when we meet someone we truly admire, but most of us have more trouble with negative experiences as we encounter our Shadow.

The Gold in our shadows is our hidden positive qualities, unrealised lifestyle gifts and talents. These two are suppressed because facing them could mean personality structure and lifestyle changes. (Megge Hil Fizz Randolph July 12, 2008).

In summary, the shadow is everything in us that is unconscious, repressed, underdeveloped and denied. My own mother, studying psychology at the time, talked about the shadow to great extent as I grew up. And it was essential to confront one’s own shadow in order to bring about self-awareness. It is therefore significant that the physical shadow is present and highlighted in my paintings.

So with all this in mind let us journey through history.



The 15th century Renaissance period was perhaps the first time the projected shadow made its appearance. There was a focus on naturalism in a style that aimed at the illusion of a three dimensional reality. And to produce this reality the artist had to look at the shadow, the lights and the darks.

The exhibition looked at artists such as Gentile da Fabriano, Giovanni di Paolo, Pier Maria Pennacchi, Lorenzo Lotto, Jan van Eyck, Loenzo di Credi and Ludovico Carraci.

**Lorenzi di Credi –
Annunciation, c 1480 – 1485**

In Lorenzo di Credi’s “Annunciation” (1480 – 1485), the shadow is said to acquire an important symbolic connotation associated with the subject

of the Annunciation. Here the shadow increases the opaqueness of the archangel and refers to the “Shadow of the Almighty”, a famous biblical term to describe God and whose power brought about the miracle of the Incarnation. The shadow pushes the Archangel forward making him important.

The Tenebrist Baroque painters then took the execution of the shadow and pushed it a little further in order to capture a dramatic naturalism that had not yet been exploited. The Renaissance painters had been a little tentative in their use of the shadow for fear of losing visual clarity pertaining to classical ideals. They seemed scared to muddy or blur their composition.

The Baroque room held paintings by the following artists. Jean Leclerc, Matthias Stomer, Gerrit van Honthurst, Hendrik ter Brugghen, Georges de la Tour, Mattia Preti, Rembrandt, Pieter de Zhooch and Gerrit Dou.

All the paintings here, as with the renaissance, are religious in nature. The shadow in works such as *Jean Leclerc – “The denial of St Peter*, served to emphasis the sacred presence and its manifestations in every day life. In the painting by *Rembrandt “Man sitting at the table reading in a noble room”* (1628-1630) the compositional space is constructed with light and shadow, capturing a concrete moment in time.



Jean LeClerc
The Denial of St Peter



Rembrandt Harmensz Van Rijn
Man sitting at a Table reading in a Noble Room

The 18th century brought about the Romantic or Enlightened era. There was a break from focusing on the classical ideals of wholeness and a move towards emotion, nostalgia and the sublime. The shadow here begins to be appreciated for its narrative qualities, generally a negative one. We begin to witness an "aesthetic of the sinister".

This room shows works by Francisco de Goya, Henrich Wilhelm Tischbein, Joseph Wright of Derby, Adolf Menzel, Jean-Francois Millet, William Holman Hunt, Jean-Paul Laurens, Gioacchino Toma and Emile Friant.

The shadows in *Goya's* "Corral de locos" (1794), enhance the dreary scene and evoke a sinister feel. *Tischbein's* shadow in *The Long shadow* (1805) almost envelopes the person in an attitude of reflection. Although the shadow here begins to evoke another reality, it is still very much done in a naturalistic manner. Naturalistic in a sense that it adheres very closely to the appearance of the natural world. (Gardner page 894).



Francisco de Goya
Corral de Locos, 1794



Heirich Wilhelm Tischbein
The LongShadow, 1805

The next room was devoted to paintings representing the Symbolic period. Symbolism involved the departure away from a naturalistic depiction of reality. Subjectivity became the primary axis of representation. This room contained paintings by Claude Monet (his interiors), Edouard Vuillard, Felix Valloten, Leon Spilliaert, Xavier Mellery, Franlisek Kupka.

Claude Monet's "The Dinner" (1868-1869) emphasises the study of light and shadow as a visual phenomena. The shadow dims what is not important and highlights the artist's focus, a daily family ritual of eating at the dinner table. However, there is an atmosphere of mystery and sombreness. These two qualities inspired much creativity in the painters and writers of the time. Subjectivity became the primary axis of representation and the shadow is a useful tool to increase these two traits. In *Spilliaert's "Nightlife" (1908)*, the forms flatten out, and the shadow occupies much of the painting and used with greater narrative intent. This image relates to Rembrandt's "Man sitting at a table in a noble room" done 280 years before. In both Monet's and Spilliaert's paintings the shadowed areas dominate the canvas, a very new focus that had not yet been achieved.



Claude Monet
The Dinner, c 1868 – 1869



Leon Spilliaert
Nightlife, 1908

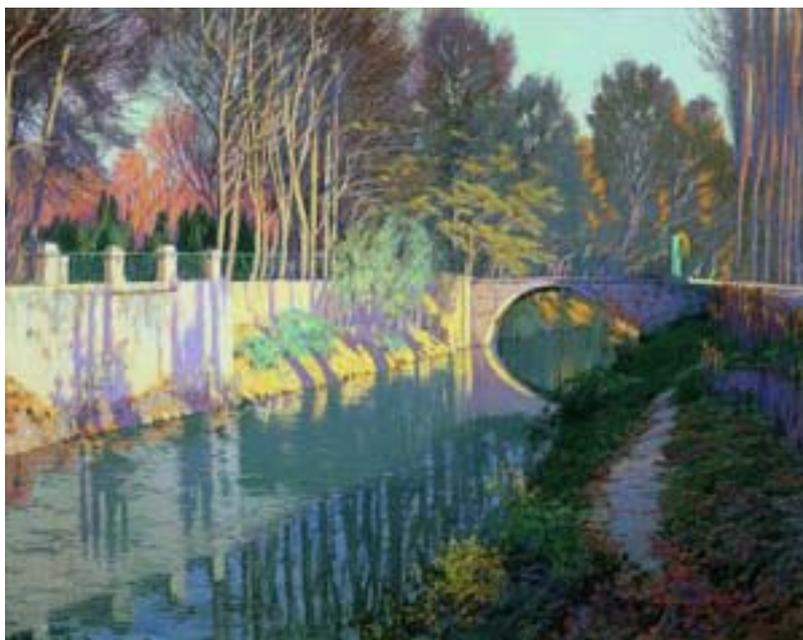
The last section representing this part of the exhibition concludes with a section on Impressionism. Artists, such as Camille Pisario, Alfred Sisley, Cildeee Hassam and Dario de Regoyos have been chosen here.

It reveals the important change of direction in the treatment of the shadow. The shadow now disregards its narrative function to become the subject of purely visual investigation.

In such works by *Joaquin Sorolla Bastida* – “*Under the Canopy*” (1906) and *Santiago Rusiñol* – “*View of the Island Garden in Aranjuez:*” (1915) one can see the absolute delight in colour within the shadow. And by replacing the traditional use of black, for that of coloured shadows, the disappearance of any negative implications results.



Joaquin Sorolla Bastida
Under the canopy, Biarritz, 1906



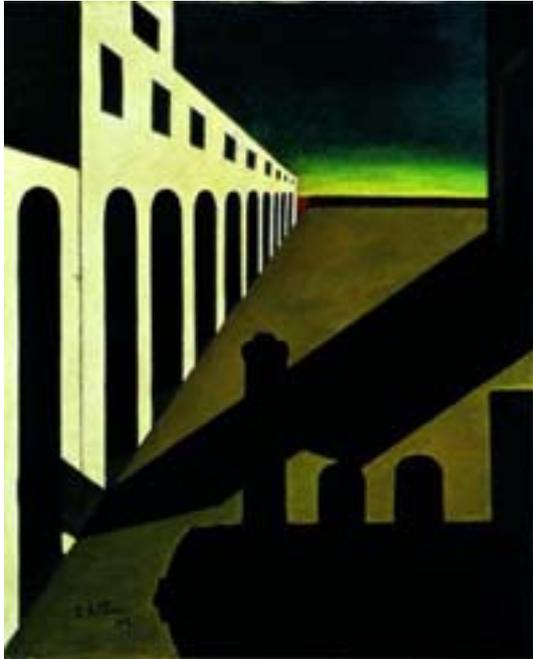
Santiago Rusiñol
View of the Island Garden in Aranjuez, 1915

Picasso is placed under the banner of Modern Realism. It makes sense that shadows were completely fragmented by Cubism in the twentieth century and almost done away with. The shadow no longer needed to be attached to the form facing the light. In *Pablo Picasso's "The shadow on Women (1953)* the shadow is no longer the negative of the positive, but is itself a presence. Transparent, yes, but nevertheless a dominant feature in the painting, and interestingly it is not cut up. The presence of the figure in the shadow is felt. There is no need to show the positive form. The message is clear.



Pablo Picasso
Shadow on Women, 1953

Giorgio de Chirico's "The harrowing morning" (1912) contains the type of exaggerated shadow typical of this period and indicates a fictitious lifelikeness that imbues the scene with a nightmarish feel. The buildings look solid enough but the long shadows and green tones suggest something is not all in place. The image appears settled enough but contains an unsettling atmosphere of something sinister about to happen.



Giorgio di Chirico
The Harrowing Morning



Christian Schad
Portrait of Dr Haustein, 1928

This duality is characteristic of 20th century realist painting, in which the sinister co-exists with the false appearance of a stable order. Interestingly it is around this time, the 1930's, that Jung developed his theories on the shadow mimicking his notion that 'man' was not totally what appearances showed. He investigated the shadow as being the destructive aspect as well as the hidden positive qualities that lie in the subconscious mind of a person. A more obvious example of this is seen in the painting of *Christiaan Schad* called "*Portrait of Dr Haustein*" (1928) where the portrait is realistic enough but the shadow does not relate to the posture of the figure and furthermore has an ominous presence. The other artists represented here is Edward Hopper, Rockwell Kent, Felix Nussbaum, Dick Ket, Carel Willink, Pyke Kosh and Alfonso Ponce de Leon.

Of all modern movements, it was Surrealism that paid most attention to the treatment of shadow, particularly with regard to that movement's interest in representing dreams.

Artists such as Salvador Dali, Yves Tanguy, René Magritte, Paul Delvaux, Esteban Frances, Max Ernst and Joseph Cornell gave the representation of dreams a sense of realism that seemed more intense than the reality before our own eyes. They did this through their use of highly detailed, painstaking technique and the insistent use of shadows.

Dali in "*Metamorphosis of Narcissus*" (1937) uses light and darkened shadow to recompose contradictory images as part of his "paranoical-critical" method. Realism is offset by unnatural rock formations containing a presence. The lengthened shadows increase an unsettled feeling.



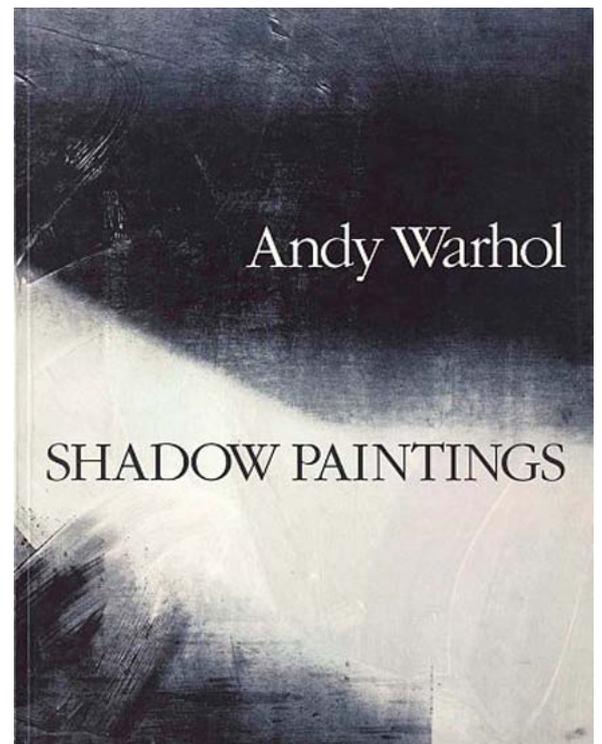
Salvador Dali
Metamorphosis of Narcissus, 1937

The 1960's saw the works of pop artists such as Andy Warhol employing the shadow from everyday life.

In the mid 1970's, shadows began to assume importance in their own right. They stood separate to the possible form. In Andy Warhol's self portrait, *The Shadow* (1981), the artist replaced his own profile in the shadow with that of a popular ubiquitous hero of a popular radio serial. Perhaps by using this shadow, the artist was commenting on society's trying to replicate popular imagery hence losing individuality. This concept was the underlying agent to his mass production series.



Andy Warhol
The Shadow, 1981



Andy Warhol
1989 (New York: Gagosian Gallery)

It is said that the genesis of the shadow in Warhol's work derived from a photo of a shadow in his studio. His interest in the shadow was to inspire him to create abstract forms. He is recorded to have said "There is almost nothing on them. Yet they seem to be pictures of something" (shadows and other signs of life by Benjamin H.D. Bushloh – Dec 4, 1998 – June 13, 1999).

Warhol's shadow allowed him to reduce objects to its essentials, devoid of identifiable original source. It exists in and of itself, a purposefully made image of "nothing". It contains a subtle play with issues of representation. It opens up discussion around reality and illusion, presence and absence.

Interestingly, in a series of Warhol's Still life drawings of 1975, it is said that he used a projector to trace the shadow of an eggbeater and bowl. The continuous line of the bowl into the shadow shows evidence of tracing. This idea reflects his great interest in capturing the shadow. (Tracing the lineage of optics (Gwen Seemel) – 17 August 2009)



Andy Warhol
Still Life Drawing 1975 (detail)

At times the shadow alone has a presence. In Ed Ruscha's "Buffalo" 1989 it became the positive form. In Picasso's painting the shadow has transparent qualities. In Tischbein's painting the shadow had a narrative story to tell suggesting the "Jungian" concept of overwhelming emotion within the person.

A shadow is at once an image of nothing – a negative – but here the buffalo done in some indescriptive manner, generalises the form of the animal and its shadow becomes the focal point, the positive image.



Ed Ruscha
Buffalo, 1989

In summary, what then does the shadow represent. What are its many themes? As has been pointed out in various places, it seems that certain of its meaning or execution is present intermittently throughout the ages.

First and foremost, the shadow is *representational of an every day occurrence*. A phenomenon when the sun is out and the figure or object is in front of direct light, a shadow will be cast. It therefore has a naturalistic intent, emphasizing light and dark, reinforcing perspective and thereby reinstating a sense of realism.

A shadow can tell direction. If one thinks back to sun dials, the shadow from the stick not only told the time but could also inform the observer about the direction on a compass. Interestingly this concept can stand in a metaphorical sense to reinforce Plato and Jung's theories about bringing about enlightenment through understanding. In Plato's case, the shapes in the cave were not to be feared and in Jung's case psychologically once an awareness of self was realised a healthy mental attitude could be instilled. In psychological terms therapy helps one achieve a "true north". This means that once all the clutter and noise has been worked through, the person is better able to identify priorities with a deeper understanding of themselves and their make up. They would be pointed in the right direction.

The shadow on the canvas occupies a compositional space. Indeed, artists such as Kentrige, Ruscha and Warhol chose to work with the shadow alone to represent their message, finding it a sufficient form even in its lack of detail. It aided Warhol towards his love of abstract shapes.

The shadow also indicates a concrete moment in time. In the middle of the day the shadow is shortened but by the late afternoon it has lengthened. When the shadow is elongated and darkened as in the case of the surrealists, it takes on a *sinister* or eerie appearance. This feature feels uncomfortable. Eeriness is hopefully avoided in my work through the use of luminous colours in my painting and the light background.

Some of my shadows have colour, texture or focus on the surface that they fall on. Perhaps it is an extension of impressionism in order to capture a fleeting impression of every day life. Pure delight in a visual investigation. Or perhaps the *colours* that sparkle in the darkness represent what Jung calls "the gold" in the shadow. I was researching this concept at the time of painting the shadow over pebbles next to feet. My daughter came in and marvelled as a eight year old would at the sparkling jewels! I named this painting "Gold in your shadow"

The shadow can exist as a metaphor in a painting. The nature of its shape adds meaning to the painting. In "Dancing Shadow" for example, the shadow informs the viewer of the state of being of the person whose feet have been focused on. It moves meaning beyond just a scientific portrayal and study of feet.

In "Hidden", the shadow now placed on top of the flesh talks about so much more than just a reflection. Through its shape it can allude to the adornment of a tattoo or to the "henna" rituals prevalent in South Africa on the occasion of a celebration. I enjoy this latter description as whilst the right hand is tucked and protected by the upper hand, the upper hand is almost hidden under the shade of the leaves whose imprint takes on another meaning of joy because of the henna celebratory illusion. I acknowledge we all bring to our interpretation of the world a view informed by our personal life experiences and background. Therefore it is quiet alright, that depending on the person viewing, differing interpretations can be the result. Personally I

read this painting as containing hope. Hope that as the left hand awaits and rests, under the spell of a stroke, it awaits the day of its enlightenment...



**Ana Pereira de Vlieg
Dancing Shadow 2010**



**Ana Pereira de Vlieg
Gold in my shadow, 2010**



**Ana Pereira de Vlieg
Shadows Hidden, 2010**