

# Why is Some Art Sacred?

By Ekabhumi Ellik ([www.ekabhumi.com](http://www.ekabhumi.com))

*This essay was inspired by a note I received from someone asking why anyone's art would be "more sacred" than that of anyone else. "Are we not all children of God, given talents by Him? Her??" To me, this was an excellent question and appropriate for anyone to consider before calling their own work Sacred. Here is my answer:*

Thank you for your question! I went back and looked at the note that you've responded to, so as to be certain that I did not say that some art is "more sacred" than others. I did not! I will assume, for the sake of argument, that you take issue that I've used the term "Sacred Art" at all, which implies that some art is not sacred.

So, just my personal opinion here: we need to establish first why it is that we recognize things as different from one another, and why some things are sacred, and some are not. Some say that duality is an illusion created by the love play of Shiva and Shakti, who, in order to appreciate one another, appear to separate. In this game, some things appear more or less sacred, more or less divine. If this were not the case, we would all recognize our inherent divinity, reside in an enlightened state, and the game would be over. Without this play, there would be no sacred, no profane, no separation, no manifest universe at all, really!

Belief is fundamental. Some traditions teach that the manifest world is an illusion which distracts from that which is True. From this view, no thing is real, the manifest universe is a distracting illusion, and therefore not divine. Some Christian sects, for example, ban ANY 'graven images,' even photographs! From this view, there is no art that is more or less sacred, because it is all a distraction, or unreal. Yet other traditions teach that everything is divine, including the manifest world. In this view, every thing is real (including the illusion), and therefore divine. Some radical Tantrics (Aghoris) will actually meditate in filthy places and eat disgusting things as a way of eliminating preferences. From this point of view, there is no art that is more or less sacred, because everything is sacred. It is said that both the "everything is sacred" and the "nothing is sacred" views are paths to enlightenment, one merely chooses the most appropriate path for one's personal disposition. I belong to the "everything is sacred" school.

Until we reach that rarified state of non-duality, it is useful to designate what is appropriate for my personal use. Consider: many people would argue that a baby is more divine, conscious, precious and alive than a turd, but in truth, one could not exist without the other. In this sense, they are non-different. Because of my biases as a human, and because of the role I like to play in this game, and in order to interact in a healthy fashion with other humans, I would designate a baby as sacred, but not a turd. It is the same with art. Different works of art have different functions. Consider a decorative model sailing ship and the actual ship it duplicates. They may be identical in shape, and both could be considered works of art, but only one of the two is actually functional and built with the intention of transporting passengers to a new location. There is a functional difference between art that is designed to take one's consciousness to a specific new location, and art that merely entertains or stimulates the intellect. All art is sacred, yet I find it useful only to designate some art as Sacred Art. Is this hypocritical?

It is also taught that mixing and matching views is problematic; namely, designating some things as “good” or “real” while also naming some things as “bad” or “unreal.” This would seem to put us in a quandary: if everything is sacred, how do we discern what is good or bad, what is poison and what is nectar? We humans have a fundamental ‘bottom line’ which can act as a guide: our bodies. Primacy of the Body is a basic standard taught to me by my own spiritual teacher. Even while recognizing everything as ‘real’ and ‘divine’ in a non-dual sense, we can also recognize that which is appropriate for our human experience, what we are able to digest, and that which is not. A turd is not ‘good’ or ‘bad’, it just is. Baby food is not more sacred than turds, but it is more appropriate for food in most human bodies most of the time. There is a functional difference, and it is useful to have a way of communicating this fact.

“For whom and when?” is an excellent question to ask when determine whether a food, medicine, or work of art should be taken home, so to speak. Though I recognize that turds may fertilize flowers, I do not snuggle with them as I might with babies. Some folks may recognize that babies and turds often travel together. In truth you can't have one without the other, yet most folks don't keep turds swaddled in blankets safe in a bedroom cradle. Both are sacred, both are necessary, they are dependent on one another, yet one is kept, the other discarded, and this is NOT hypocrisy. I can recognize that flowers might (metaphorically) consider turds to be sacred, but I myself do not need to treat them that way. So, while all art is sacred in a sense, not all art is Sacred Art all the time.

Many artists consciously set out to create vulgar, prurient, and/or profane art. Many artists create art out of an emotional need with no particular concern for any status regarding sacred or profane. Many artists create art for purely commercial or entertainment purposes. Some art is created to manipulate, seduce, or harm (propaganda). Some artists are motivated by a desire for attention and personal ego-building and the art itself is only a vehicle for their personal cult of personality. Some artists indulge in a kind of martyr syndrome and use their work as a way of aggrandizing their uniqueness and/or suffering. Some may even create art which labeled ‘sacred’ and uses imagery that is generally recognized religious or spiritual, yet have no spiritual alignment with the imagery or work. Most of the time, when I see two or more of these factors come together in confluence in a work of art, I consider it to be NOT Sacred.

Motive of the artist plays a key role in the designation of sacred and/or profane. Some artists create their work with the motive of ‘pointing out’ or showcasing what they consider to be divine, enlightening, or praiseworthy. I would personally add that this is especially true of artwork which places emphasis on all that which is more expansive than the separate personal ego-self. Some artists consciously set about to create Sacred Art, whether traditional or not. Some artists create or facilitate the creation of art (regardless of imagery) for healing purposes and/or community benefit. Some artists are aligned with a tradition of sacred art, using imagery that is generally recognized as religious and spiritual. Most of the time, when I see two or more of these factors come together in confluence in a work of art, I consider it to be Sacred.

Context and/or the Viewer also play a key role in the designation of sacred and/or profane. It is possible for the profane to become sacred. A large rock by the side of the road may come to be worshiped as sacred; such shrines exist in India. The rock may be ‘transformed’ with paint and decoration, or not. What I take away from this is that the appearance of a thing not as important as the use of the thing. It is possible for the use of an image or object to make it sacred. A commercial plastic doll can be transformed into the icon of a goddess on an altar. A nondescript building can be consecrated as a church. How a thing is used changes the way we

describe the thing. I would even say there is an energetic difference. When an otherwise 'normal' object or event happens to be in a sacred space, I will treat it as sacred.

When I see an object or a work of art that might otherwise appear profane being venerated, honored, or worshiped, I will treat it as sacred out of respect. This is also true of art which mixes both sacred and profane characteristics. Even if it does not feel sacred to me, I'll look at where it is, how it is, how others react to it, and treat it accordingly out of respect. I believe there are many 'paths to the mountain-top', including many I have no desire to travel and may not even recognize. A truly dastardly artist (Caravaggio comes to mind) with prurient motive can create religious art that is installed in a church and inspires untold numbers of faithful people. This is also Sacred Art.

Finally, I also honor that inexplicable reaction which happens in my own experience when an object or event becomes sacred to me. I would hesitate before calling any work of art "Not Sacred." I've never found it necessary! Yet I am very careful before naming something Sacred, even more careful before I take that thing home and put it on my altar. Medicine to one person may be poison to another. Many works of art can be deeply moving, spiritual, powerful and may have a sacred role in the greater scheme of things. Yet to be Sacred Art in my own personal view, it needs to move that mysterious place in me, pointing the way toward the Divine. Or more profoundly, toward recognizing divinity in all things.

In my own recent work, my motive is to create Sacred Art. This work is meant to serve both myself, others, and a larger community. It utilizes traditional images (yantras, for example) that have long been recognized as both sacred and beneficial when used appropriately. I am also making art that is in alignment with my own personal spiritual practice. Some of it is meant to be used in ritual, for example, or placed on altars. When I call any of my work Sacred, it fulfills two or more of the qualities I recognize in any art I would call sacred: it exists in a sacred context, and/or it is used in a sacred function, and/or others recognize it as sacred, and/or it incorporates traditional sacred imagery, and/or it is deeply moving to me in a sacred way.

In the past, my work also incorporated religious imagery, served a larger community, and was used for healing purposes. Yet I had no urge to designate it as sacred, mainly because it was not my intent to create Sacred Art, nor was I concerned with how it was used or perceived after being sold. Though it may not be necessary to label my new work as "Sacred," I use the term to clarify my own relationship to the work, motive for creating it, and to imply how I wish it to be treated. I do believe some images (such as yantras) are powerful and may be harmful if misused. Therefore, the designation Sacred Art is both useful and cautionary. It is also a term of respect for the tradition from which I share imagery. Calling the art I produce Sacred is not a designation of superiority, it is a term to indicate the work's intended use and function.