

'The Tree of Life' by Louis Cattiaux

Commentary by Gauthier Pierozak and Nigel Jackson

'The cross unites the fire and the earth which are in the centre,
and the circle unites the air and the water that surround them.'

Louis Cattiaux, '*The Message Rediscovered*', Book VI, v. 5.

From 1947 to 1950, the artist-painter Louis Cattiaux exchanged a significant correspondence with the metaphysician René Guénon, who resided in Cairo, Egypt, having voluntarily isolated himself from the modern world. Cattiaux had been reading Guénon's work, and studying alchemy and hermetism. Emerging, in a manner not dissimilar to Cecil Collins, from a background in the Surrealist avant-garde and after passing through the movement called *Transbylisme*, Cattiaux had become an independent and quite isolated figure whose work expressed, through its almost child-like forms and spiritual ambience of revelation, the primordial visions of the Golden Age.

Louis Cattiaux had self-published in 1946 the first twelve chapters of an "inspired" book, entitled *The Message Rediscovered*, after the loss of the initial manuscript appropriately called *The Lost Message*. Facing a total disinterest from publishers and readers in Europe, he decided to send a copy to Guénon who ended up publishing a very positive review of this book in the journal *Études Traditionnelles* in 1948 (it must be noted that Guénon rarely published positive reviews). After locating the work within the spiritual-metaphysical climate of Christian hermetism and noting affinities with Taoist doctrines therein the conclu-

sion of the review stated that “we do not know what the ‘specialists’ of hermetism, if there are still any real competent ones left, will think of this book, and how they will appreciate it; but it is certain that this book is far from being indifferent, and that it deserves to be read and to be studied carefully by everyone who is interested in this particular aspect of the tradition.”

Cattiaux was delighted. No publisher had given him any response and Guénon suddenly gave him credentials he so desperately needed. As a result, in a letter dated October 19, 1948, Cattiaux told Guénon: “I do not know how to thank you for having so generously mentioned my book at the end of your review. Would you accept a small painting in memory of our spiritual encounter? I do not know your position as far as ‘images’ are concerned and I do not dare send you anything without an approval beforehand.” In a prior letter (April 7, 1948) he had mentioned that this was an alchemical painting, made with the beautiful and rare matter of the painters from the 15th century. Guénon responded with his approval, cautioning Cattiaux that there was very little chance that the painting would make it to Egypt, considering the conditions of the postal service after the disturbances from World War II.

On December 12, 1948, Cattiaux informed Guénon that he was sending him “a small talismanic painting entitled ‘The Tree of Life’. I chose something that is going beyond the ordinary appearances looked for in the art of painting. You will notice that there is, in the center of the tree, something like a fruit that is a ‘really living’ matter, and fairly rare in this state of purity. I hope you will enjoy it, or at least that you will get used to it despite its surprising first appearance.”

On February 7, 1949, Guénon acknowledged receipt of the painting and commented that “you have certainly chosen an appropriate subject; the aspect of it is indeed somewhat strange at first sight, as you warned about it, but there is something striking in the colors, that reminds one of old stained glass; is there, in the material used, something that can explain this association? In any case, this has nothing to do with the usual colors of modern painters, that give a ‘false’ effect, if one can say such a thing, similar to the musical notes of the actual Occident...”

Cattiaux responded immediately and on February 17, 1949, wrote that “I paint with the matter of the ancients who were more knowledgeable than us [...]. I chose the Tree of Life, thinking I would honor you

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