



Transcendental Aesthetics of Ednah Dow Cheney (1824–1904)

Therese Boos Dykeman

A Transcendentalist, Ednah Dow Cheney believed in self-reliance, self-culture, the importance of education, and the experiencing of the divine directly through nature. However, her “philosophy of Ideal Art” differed from the Transcendentalist philosophy of Emerson. While Emerson held to a unity or oneness, Cheney claimed, “the first grand principle of Art, is that it must be two-fold”: material and spiritual, thought and feeling, masculine and feminine. Art as “human activity” is a great educator, demanding that artists look beyond their own subjective experience and develop more broadly intellectually and spiritually. Art education is a reflexive activity between creating and appreciating, both require fitness of soul. Study to understand the environment and the nature of art itself means, for Cheney, empirical study as much as subject experience. Science, that studies parts, is not opposed to art, which studies parts in relation to the whole, but rather works “in harmony with art.” Art, meaning both thought and feeling in material form, allies closely to religion and science. As in life the material of art is subordinate to the spiritual. Art by bringing with it harmony and values expresses and elevates both individuals and society. Thus art is capable of lifting up a nation intellectually and spiritually, improving it by leading it to social reform. While Cheney’s theory of art accepts many of the principles of Emerson’s Transcendentalism, it also deviates. Her aesthetics focuses less on Emerson’s Romantic notion of beauty than on human nobility and practical consequences in society. After studying art works, reading and lecturing on art, and listening to philosophical lectures on Transcendentalism by R.W. Emerson, Theodore Parker, Bronson Alcott, and Margaret Fuller, Cheney developed a Transcendentalist aesthetic philosophy of art in her 1881 *Gleanings in the Fields of Art*, the first book on aesthetics written by an American woman.

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