

The Numinous Room

1974

The “room” of this painting is an imaginative space, high among the clouds and lacking even walls. But there are divisions and demarcations: the stairs that bisect the painting, the window on the far right, the outlines of doors on either side, the irregular white and gold gridlines, the edges of the painting itself. Framed by a fireplace, the children at the center draw our attention immediately, though they appear translucent, as if fading into the cloudscape behind them. Above them on the mantel sits a blank-faced clock, and a bearded figure (Father Timelessness?) rests his hand beside it as he clutches an infant to his chest. The long-legged girl descending the stairs—the most corporeal of the people in the painting—seems disquieted by the whole ghostly tableau; perhaps she has stumbled upon it unwittingly, in pursuit of the little dog in the lower right-hand corner.

The title of the painting may have taken inspiration from the German philosopher Rudolf Otto’s concept of the numinous, introduced in his book *The Idea of the Holy* (1917). Otto defines the numinous as the basis for religious experience, a “non-rational, non-sensory experience or feeling whose primary and immediate object is outside the self”—an object that provokes a sense of awe or dread. C. S. Lewis, whose work Jones deeply admired, later explored the concept in *The Problem of Pain* (1940), tracing the numinous experience through Western culture and distinguishing the awe one feels in the face of it from the “physical fear” one feels in response to danger in the material world. “Just as no enumeration of the physical qualities of a beautiful object could ever include its beauty, or give the faintest hint of what we mean by beauty to a creature without aesthetic experience,” Lewis writes, “so no factual description of any human environment could include the uncanny and the Numinous or even hint at them.” Jones’s painting could be viewed as a gentle rebuke to Lewis’s assertion, as it appears to both depict and enact an encounter with the numinous in a domestic space, of which it also seems to be a part. Like the girl on the stairs, the viewer is called on to confront the uncanny, to question the boundaries between the physical and the metaphysical, the visible and the unseen.