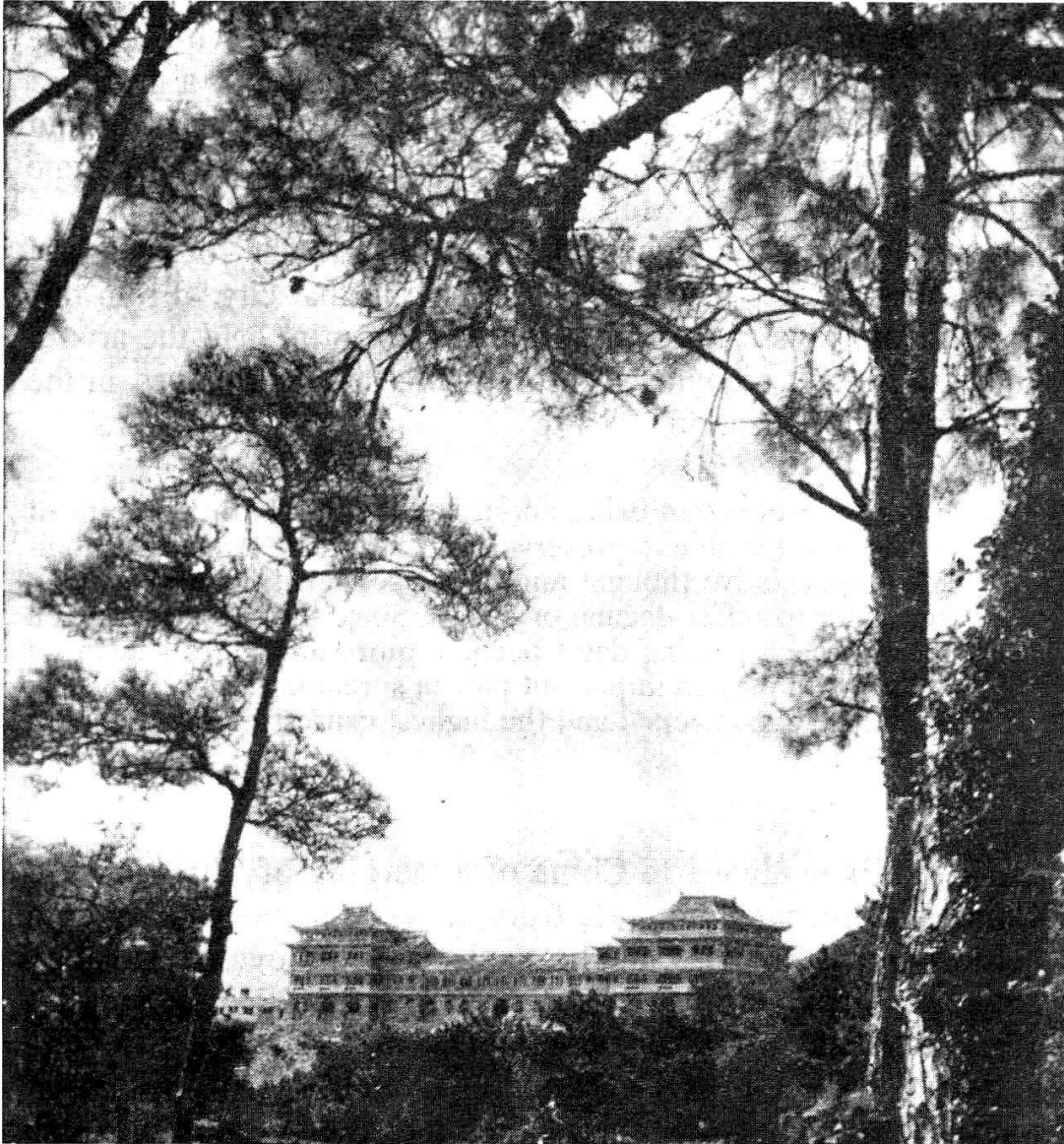


History***Costantini: Patron of Chinese Church Art***

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During the early years of the 20th century, China experienced a growing wave of nationalism. This new self-awareness of being Chinese also attracted a great deal of attention among Chinese Catholics. In 1926, the Vatican's Apostolic delegate, Celso Cardinal Costantini, personally led a delegation of six Chinese priests: Zhao Huaiyi, Zhu Kaimin, Hu Ruoshan, Sun Dezhen, Chen Guodi and Cheng Hede to Rome where they were consecrated bishops by Pope Pius XI in solemn ceremony. There followed a series of radical changes in attitude and discernible modifications in the manner and style of the Church in China which allowed for the local Church to become more and more Chinese. And a new ingredient, a strong and justifiable feeling of nationalism, had now been added to the long-standing conflicts that dogged the efforts of those who sought to bring traditional culture and a religion of foreign origin into harmony with each other. These events also had a formative effect on a new generation of foreign missionaries whose work reflected a discernment and resolve quite different from their immediate predecessors.

During this entire process of change, Costantini manifested a high level of intelligence and a sense of the practical. His ideas were brilliant, constructive and far-sighted. Historians have studied and debated at length Costantini's activities during this period. In this short essay I shall limit my focus to one of his many contributions to the Church in China, one that is often overlooked, which is his promotion of the movement to create in the Chinese Church an indigenous church art. Art within the church, or church art, represents a kind of style whose goal is to make manifest a catholic unity of spirit but within a diversity of cultures and customs. He said in his memoirs: "The Church has no part in the ambitions of imperialism, nor does it ever fail to show respect for the outstanding elements of every people." ¹



Under the inspiration of Costantini, the beautiful Holy Spirit Seminary, Hong Kong, was designed by Father Adalbert Gresnigt along Chinese architectural principles

Costantini was born in Italy in 1876 and he was ordained in 1899. He became Acting Administrator of Aquileia in 1915 and Auxiliary Bishop of Concordia in 1918. In 1922 he became the Bishop of Fiume, Italy, on the Yugoslav border [now Rieka in Croatia].²

Costantini displayed a talent for art from an early age. The works of clay sculptures that he had produced in his youth can still be seen in various public places in his native Murlis. To keep alive his keen interest in the history of church art, he did extensive research on the subject and edited a series of manuals on the Christian art of European cities. These were used later as

textbooks in every seminary in Italy. While in Aquileia, he organized *La Società degli Amici dell' Arte Sacra*, a group of local artists who met on a regular basis to exchange ideas and stimulate research into church art. Later, he became a part-time curator of the Aquileia Museum.³

When he was assigned to Milan in 1913, he founded and edited the monthly magazine *Arte Sacra* in that city. From this brief history, one can readily see that Costantini held the arts in high esteem and recognized the key role they had played in the evolution of civilization.

Political events can bring about change in a nation's point of view, but art is able to preserve respect for the human capability for speculative thought and practical execution, never allowing either to suffer decline or decay. Since this has always been so, with each passing day I become more and more convinced that art can play an important part in spreading the Gospel...for art of itself is universal and the highest expression of a people's genius.⁴

There is evidence in China of a merging of Christian and Chinese art form taking place from the very beginning. On both Nestorian and Roman Catholic tombstones discovered in Quanzhou and Fujian, which date back to the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368), we find a number of stone carvings of passion flowers and lotus plants clustered together in an obviously Buddhist motif. These are sometimes woven into the shape of a throne upon which a Christian cross is set.⁵

Giovanni Da Rocha, a Jesuit who arrived in China during the last years of the Ming dynasty, recorded how he had contracted a Chinese artist to illustrate in the Chinese style some Bible stories which he had translated. Also, Adam Schall, who in 1640 was serving in the imperial court of the Qing dynasty, presented the Emperor with three woodcuts depicting a Chinese version of the passion and death of Christ.⁶

The great body of artistic works given as gifts at the court by such Jesuit missionaries as Castiglione, Attiret and others during the Qing period showed a definite Eastern influence on Western art forms. Western architecture also adapted itself to Chinese patterns, as exemplified in the designs of such structures as Yuanmingyuan.⁷

When Costantini arrived in China, he found a Church still mired in the mores and customs of missionaries from the previous century. The atmosphere and tone were decidedly colonial. Some of the missionaries even espoused attitudes of racial superiority, which arose from the political conflicts and wars between China and the Western imperialists, and felt no need to show respect for Chinese culture and traditions. Costantini saw at once that the failure of the Church to incorporate traditional Chinese art forms into its efforts to evangelize was indeed a major mistake. Nor did he look with approval upon the kind of East-West amalgam that characterized the architectural style of the churches of Peking. Costantini referred disparagingly to them as pseudo-Gothic.

The four major churches of Peking are Western in style, built by foreign missionaries and lacking in beauty. Their facades display a kind of muddled Europe fashion, which is devoid of all character. They are out of harmony with and in contrast to the elegant and beautiful Chinese structures found everywhere in the rest of the city, and they remain distinctly foreign to their environment.⁸

On the other hand, when Costantini toured the Chinese countryside, he noted with delight several small churches rising prominently on the edges of freshly cultivated fields.

As wild flowers that spring up naturally along the shoreline, so too, rise up these works of Chinese art to touch people's hearts with their freshness and appropriateness for their locale. These chapels are simple and unforced in their design and yet fashioned with a purity and elegance of style that exhibits an uncommonly profound good taste.⁹

Costantini obviously felt that a necessary condition for genuine Catholic art must be its ability to form a unity with the natural and social environment in which it finds itself. And that such a quality was not only worthy of respect but also of the highest praise. He also felt that the Church, in implementing its basic concern for universal love, a love that must embrace all of humanity, should not get bogged down in the restraints imposed by provincial concerns and styles. The apostolic church borrowed the languages of Greece and Rome to express its teach-

ing. And history reveals how the Muslims did not hesitate to convert the captured cathedral of Hagai Sophia in Istanbul into a mosque, just as the Catholics of Cordova in Spain made a Christian church out of the ornately decorated Muslim mosque there.

The Buddhists and Muslims of China learned this lesson early and well. They built their monasteries and mosques in the style of the local people. Their structures were always erected according to traditional Chinese forms and patterns.

If the Apostles could accept the culture of Rome with its rich decor and style," wrote Costantini, "why can't we do the same in China?"¹⁰ Art reaches beyond mere national boundaries. While the art of each people has its own distinctive character, art itself is transcendent. Thus the Church is able to employ in the expression of its belief the distinctive art of every tribe and nation. "We are not out to 'Europeanize' China but to 'Christianize' it. And this is not an unrealizable goal for us. "¹¹

"If the apostles could accept the culture of Rome with its rich decor and style, why can't we do the same in China?"

Costantini

Costantini saw Eastern art as totally compatible with Catholic spirituality. Traditional church art in the West tends to emphasize beauty of form and composition in rendering people and events in a realistic fashion. Traditional Chinese art stresses the beauty of feeling and ideals, and it tends toward abstraction. Chinese art not only spiritualizes the people and events it depicts, but also the physical environment in which they are placed. Thus, a Chinese painting can express wonderfully poetic meanings, create a spiritual environment similar to that of the art of Western churches.

Erotic works of art are rarely found in Eastern painting...Chinese and Japanese art do not emphasize the human body as much as Western-European art, which follows traditional Greek styles. Eastern art is a poem made visible to the eye. What is revealed is not so much the objects themselves as the poetic setting in which they exist. What is rendered to the eye then is the thought of the artist, and thus it may be said that as an art form, it is essentially spiritual.¹²

One of the ways Costantini promoted the use of Chinese art within the church was to engage the assistance of accomplished Chinese artists from outside the church community. One such artist was Chen Ludu. In 1929, Mr. Chen had opened a portrait studio in Peking. Costantini paid him a visit one day and saw for himself the great skill with which Chen captured the spirit of traditional Chinese brush painting. He took note of how Chen gave particular attention to the background, which he highlighted with poetic grace and harmonious colours. Costantini was especially moved by Chen's portrait of two women standing amid a garden of flowers. He invited the artist to paint a Madonna, opening his house to Chen that he might view at leisure the works of famous Italian artists of the past; and he also introduced Chen to the Scriptures, so that he might acquaint himself with the events of the life of Jesus and Mary. Not long afterwards, Chen presented Costantini with a beautiful painting on a silk scroll of the Mary adoring the infant Jesus. This work became a point of departure for the many religious paintings in the Eastern style that were soon to follow. It also became an immediate popular favorite among Western Catholics, appearing in Catholic magazines and periodicals throughout Europe and the Americas. Mr. Chen was received into the Catholic Church on Pentecost Sunday, May 15, 1933, taking the baptismal name of Luke, who, according to tradition, was also an artist and had painted a portrait of the Blessed Mother. Chen later went on to teach at the Catholic University of Fu Jen in Peking. Numbered among his students were Wang Xiaoda, Lu Hongnian, Luke Hua, Li Wuyuan and Xu Zhihua, all of whom, following in the footsteps of their master, became famous Catholic artists.

Costantini, in his efforts to promote Chinese art within the Church, did not neglect the field of architecture. He regarded the use of Chinese forms in church buildings to be a serious matter. He invited a Benedictine monk from the famous monastery of Monte Cassino in Italy, Adalbert Gresnigt, to come to China in 1926 for the specific purpose of studying Chinese art and architecture. Father Gresnigt would later design buildings based on Chinese architectural principles for Fu Jen University, the Holy Spirit Seminary in Hong Kong, and the Disciples of the Lord in Xuanhua. From this time forward, Chinese style architecture flourished within the Catholic Church throughout China.

Costantini's ideas on art were closely associated with his

missionary thinking and methodology.

Colonialists pay little heed to the indigenous art existing around them in their colonies. They tend to import what they need from their own native lands, be it manufactured goods, art or culture. Their thinking is often at odds with that of the missionaries. Our Church has no interest in expanding political influence over local people, as is the goal of the imperial powers, but rather the Church blesses all peoples, and sees each as a special object of its mercy and loving concern. In no way does it seek to do harm to a people's culture or national character, but only, in the end, to reveal to all the merciful goodness of God.¹³

These words are as appropriate today as they were when first written, and they well might provide much food for thought for anyone presently concerned with the on-going dialogue between East and West.

Endnotes

1. Costantini, "The Question of Art in Mission Areas," *Panshi*, 1935, #3, p.5.
2. Fang Hao, *Historical Persons in the Catholic Church in China*, Chinese Book Store, 1988, Vol. 2, pp. 334-340.
3. cf. note 1, comments, Du Bauqin, the translator.
4. *A Solitary Leaf Falls [Ling Luoguyue,] Memoirs of Costantini*, Taiwan, Zhutuhui Publishers, 1980, p. 107.
5. Yang Xinzhang, He Gaoji, "Two Points of Consideration on Traces of Catholic Franciscans in Quanzhou during the Yuan Dynasty," in *Journal of World Religions*, 1983, #3.
6. Xiang Da, "Western Influence in Chinese Art of the Ming and Qing," *Eastern Magazine*, 1930, Vol. 27, #1.
7. See "The Art of Castiglione - Collected Essays from the Research Seminar on Religion and Art," Fu Jen University, Taiwan, 1991.
8. cf. note 4, p. 41
9. See note 1.
10. *Plowing in China - Costantini's Reflections*, Zhutuhui Publications, Taiwan, 1980, Vol. 2, p. 170.
11. Note 10, pp. 391-392.
12. Note 10, p. 383.
13. See note 1.

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