

## *Editorial*

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“Putting a Chinese cloak on Our Lady and painting her eyebrows black does not solve the problem of inculturation,” says Monica Liu, one of the contributors to our special issue on the *Inculturation of Religious Art in China*. In other words, superimposing European art on Chinese figures or Chinese art on European figures will not suffice.

What then will constitute the inculturation of religious art in China? Inculturation consists in reading the culture, the heart and the feelings of a people and expressing these in a totally new mode. The inculturation of religious art requires all this and, in addition, it must reflect a particular people’s unique yearning for the sacred.

Christianity, unlike Buddhism, has often been accused of failing to inculturate itself into the mainstream of China’s culture. It has been branded a foreign religion. “One more Christian, one less Chinese,” unfortunately reflects the pre-Cultural Revolution attitude of many Chinese towards Christianity in China.

The artists-contributors to this issue of *Tripod* express a range of opinions on the situation of Christian art in China. As they address the problem of inculturation, we are made aware of their valiant struggle to bring about a truly Chinese Christian art to the churches and people of their country. As He Qi so astutely points out: “As a Chinese Christian artist I can only make use of the short time I have to accomplish one task: to strive to create a Chinese Christian art. I want to do something different from da Vinci and his times. I want to do something that belongs to my times. I think of what Lu Xun once said, ‘The true artist should be a leader that does not do what people want, but one who opens new ways.’”

In this issue of *Tripod*, with the cooperation of several Chinese Christian artists, we will offer some of the best examples of Chinese Christian art opening new ways.

The tasks these artists have set for themselves is not an easy one. They constantly encounter roadblocks. They say that some of these obstacles come from the leaders of the Christian churches; others come from the people themselves who seem to think that for something to be truly Christian it must bear a European character.

And yet, long before Vatican II, sensitive missionaries like Vincent Lebbe and church leaders such as Cardinal Celso Costantini had spoken out boldly saying that the imitation of European art in paintings, sculptures and architectural designs was unsuitable for religious art in China. Cardinal Celso Costantini, himself an artist, felt that the lack of sensitivity to China’s religious and artistic soul was a major obstacle to having the people realize the universal nature of the Catholic Church. Father Vincent Lebbe, for his

part, longed to see the Church “baptize” Chinese art so that the Church in China might know its own beautiful art. It was back in 1922, more than 70 years ago, that Costantini voiced his concern to the Pope. He was convinced that genuine original Chinese art had to find its way into the churches of China in order to express adequately the spirit of the Chinese and to help erase the erroneous concept that Christianity is a foreign religion. But a person has only to visit a few churches in China today—some built very recently--to see that the goal of the Chinese Christian artists and the dreams of Lebbe and Costantini are still far from realization.

When Vatican II, in its *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, stressed the importance of setting up truly local churches, those that reflect the culture, mores and the soul of the people, it sought to encourage the leaders of the local churches, as well as artists, “to be mindful of the important place of art in honoring, praising and giving glory to God” (122).

The Church recognized the need for the inculturation of art when it said, “The Church has not adopted any particular style of art as her own. She has admitted styles from every period, in keeping with the natural characteristics and conditions of peoples and the needs of the various rites” (123).

Still, in some of the articles submitted for publication for this special issue on Christian art, we find our artists asking “for some sign of encouragement and appreciation” from the leaders of the Church as well as from other Christians. They feel that most church leaders are not interested or sufficiently concerned. Although some may be interested in art, they are not sufficiently conscious of the need to develop a genuine indigenous art, one that is truly Chinese.

It is also regrettable that the staunchest proponents of European art for China are precisely some of the Chinese faithful themselves. Local artists and architects are at pains to convince the person in the pew that their church can be thoroughly and deeply Catholic/Christian without being designed in the same mock Gothic style introduced into China by the missionaries of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; that statues and paintings of Our Lady and the Sacred Heart need not bear the mark of 19<sup>th</sup> century French spirituality.

And yet, with today’s wonderful, talented and determined group of Chinese Christian artists, there is a glimmer of hope that Chinese Christian art will eventually win the day!■ (BAM)

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