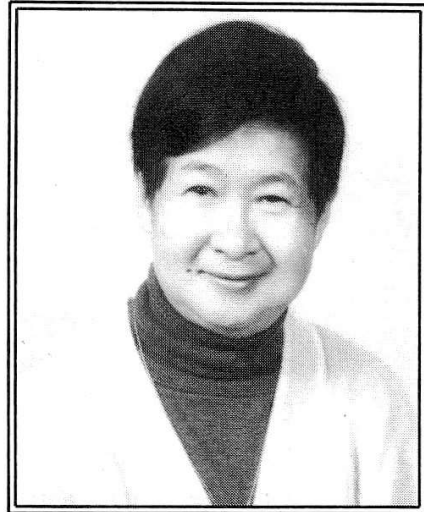


## *Inculturating Religious Art*

*by Monica Liu*

**T**he historical Jesus belonged to First Century Palestine, but the universal Christ belongs to all ages and all cultures. China, a 5000 year old culture, now meets the 2000 year old Christianity, whose roots are in the Greco-Roman-Judaic civilizations, no less than 5000 years old as well. A dialogue between the two requires a deep respect for each other.

Anyone serious about inculturation must consider not only the Judeo tradition and the evolution of the Catholic Church's doctrines, but also the feelings of our own Chinese people. For example, putting a Chinese cloak on Our Lady and painting her eyebrows black does not solve the problem of inculturation. Some superficial adaptations create a "Frankenstein" of odd parts that could scare the spectators away. Religious art speaks of God to the heart of His people. Its language must be clear, educated and kind. Any gibberish fails to achieve the desired goal.



Forty years of experience in the field of Chinese religious painting makes me keenly aware of the following points:

***Putting a Chinese cloak on Our Lady and painting her eyebrows black does not solve the problem of inculturation.***

1. We are no longer victims of post-Boxer paranoia. Although the Christian religion did come from the West with all its many Western influences, it is not a "foreign" (洋) religion. Today's Chinese embrace American ways without any difficulty, and almost everyone has visited Rome, or at least seen pictures of Rome, even children of 11 or 12. A religious art that speaks to the Chinese

must not discriminate against the Western elements, such as the curly hair and abundant beard of Our Lord. On the other hand, to copy a Western master with brush on rice paper is especially repugnant.

2. The Catholic Church consists of a heritage of doctrines, traditions and theology. Most artists, being newly converted, ignore this very important aspect of our Church. They simply make religious art a Chinese local folklore. It may be colorful, primitive and pleasant to Western admirers, but it does not speak to Chinese people about our One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.

3. The Chinese converts are very sensitive to what they have abandoned in order to enjoy the freedom of a new religion. So, it is not wise to paint Our Lady after the image of Kwan-Yin (Goddess of Mercy), Our Lord after Confucius, or God the Father after the god of Longevity. In one instance, an image of Our Lady, made by a missionary artist, was dressed like the Dowager Queen of Manchu. On her lap, stood the Infant Jesus in the costume of a Ching Emperor, held a Western scepter, and wore a Western crown. People who abhor the Dowager Queen certainly do not like this image. However, Cardinal Costantini praised this image greatly, and claimed it pleased the Chinese Christians. These opinions illustrate the extreme politeness of older Chinese people who did not wish to offend their missionaries, but in the depth of their hearts, they would rather have an image in Saint Sulpician style!

4. Foreigners, more than the Chinese themselves, admire religious art in Chinese style. The main reason is that the artist did not receive serious training in Chinese art. Beautiful colors and erotica are traits that Westerners admire, while the Chinese demand a serious, creative art based on very strict rules, such as tracing the lines according to the high technique of calligraphy. Michelangelo was so right when he said a religious artist must be the best artist and the best religious person.

5. In order to speak of God to Chinese people, a person need not have great eloquence, but that speaker must be full of God. Today art becomes a commodity and artists are preoccupied to find a market for their works. The Church, especially

the Chinese Church, whether in China, Taiwan, or Hong Kong or in the diaspora, certainly is not a paying market! The Church rather ex-

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pects artists to dedicate their service without pay. As a result, there are more cheap works than great creations. Those who are willing to make some money from their works are vendors who mass-produce and walk from one convent to another to sell them to missionaries returning home in need of inexpensive gifts for relatives. How to encourage artists in spiritual pursuits and create great art for decent pay is a problem not just for artists but also for the Church.

6. Today's young people are knowledgeable about world geography, the Bible and languages. They are also trained in a sophisticated appreciation of art, particularly Western art. Therefore old fashioned, historically, geographically and biblically incorrect Chinese religious art lacks appeal to them. My art work dictated by old Chinese priests is simply "weird" to a young audience — a painful fact for me. A student of Fu-Jen said to me "Lau-shi (Master), your paintings look like 'The Third Wife Admonishes the Son' (三娘教子)! It is not Our Lady and the Child Jesus!" After some critical thinking, the young Catholics finally accepted my large size oil painting for the Sisters of St. Theresa in Taoyuan. A young woman said, "For us, that is she." What's different? Her face is less mask-like, her body is elongated, which gives her a modern look. Although she and the Child Jesus both wear ancient Chinese dress, obviously that does not bother the young people. The meaning of the picture is simple: Our Lady brings God to China. The realistic landscape speaks loudly and clearly and my students pointed that out and approved it

In conclusion I wish to say that I realize that achieving an inculturated religious art is no easy task. This inculturation is not achieved by putting odd parts together to create a "Frankenstein". East and West must be "unified" (貫通) first in the very person of the artist. Then his creation will be like "a heavenly gown without seam" (天衣無縫).

For my part, I work almost alone, without much support from the Church. Is religious art important in the spreading of the Gospel? I wish the Church would examine the Buddhists' methods. In Taiwan talented young students are sent to art schools in the country and abroad, and their works are widely used in all liturgical, cultural and even political events. Art is a great strength in all branches of Buddhism. Consider the marvelous butter sculptures and sand paintings of Tibetan Buddhism. Large numbers of very enthusiastic students attend all my classes in Fu-Jen University (Religious Art, Art Appreciation, etc.). During a Christmas party, kids vied to

grab an image reproduced from my paintings. When art talks, people listen! The artist is a real missionary who captures hearts through beauty. I must emphasize that beauty is not colorful sweetness; it is a great harmony that makes all our senses vibrate in unison. An inculturated religious art must be able to speak of a God known by the Jewish patriarchs, Christian Fathers and Saints, to the most recent martyrs, kings and peasants, parents and children--A God known also by our grandfathers of the Shang, Chou, and Han Dynasties. If the early part of our church history is a history of the Western world, the language we use to talk about our Mother the Church must be nonetheless an educated, polished, easily understood modern Chinese language.

When all the diverse elements of our faith are expressed in a great harmony, then this art is beautiful. Michelangelo, Bernini, Rembrandt, Rouault are men of extraordinary faith and extraordinary artistic talent, men of their own century, their own country and men of universal and timeless Christian convictions. They have achieved a great harmony in their very person.

Have we these kind of artists, and can we give them a chance to express their faith, and ensure that religious art is inculturated? Dr. He-Qi (何琦) from the Nangjing theologate (Protestant, supported by the Amity Foundation), in a soft and simple manner told me how he and another young artist, Ding Fang (丁方) met to share the Bible. The latter came from Hebei (河北) and wants to see Redemption arrive in the Yellow River Valley. The works of these two young men are stunning. Mr. He is versatile in Chinese traditional calligraphy and literature, therefore, a man in whom East and West, ancient and modern, biblical and Yunnan folklore become one. He speaks not only to Chinese but to Westerners as well — always in a very humble, easygoing way.

Am I envious? Not really. I feel very happy that *TRIPOD* gives me a chance to talk to our own brethren. My humble works are accepted by our people and also by Westerners, though in a much smaller way. My efforts in promoting Chinese religious art is like a mustard seed. In due time God will let it grow. I may well never see that day, but I am sure nothing can stop a life from growing.