

Christian Art in Taiwan

By Ye Weimin

Translated by Peter Barry, M.M.

Preface

I received a phone call recently from my old friend, Guo Bingsheng. He asked me how the Catholic artists who had promoted and participated in our past “Sacred Art Exhibitions” were doing. Later he faxed me a letter he received from Holy Spirit Study Centre in Hong Kong, asking for a short essay of 3,000 words about the situation of Christian art in Taiwan. Although the letter asked for my “exalted



opinions,” I fear that I can only express some ordinary ones. I have, of course, in the past, for the sake of “Christian Art” and “Evangelization,” traveled a great deal throughout Taiwan. Also, I did accompany the internationally acclaimed artist Yang Yingfeng and others, to attend the annual meetings of the Asian Christian Art Association in order to promote the indigenization of Christian art in Taiwan. Mr. Yang died on October 21, 1997, so I would like to dedicate this essay to his memory.

Exhibitions of Sacred Art

After the Second Vatican Council the Catholic Church “invited everyone to undertake a profound interior renewal so that they might become vitally conscious of their responsibility to spread the Gospel” (*Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church*, no. 35). Vatican II’s *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, no. 122, more directly pointed out: “The fine arts are rightly classed among the noblest activities of man’s genius; this is especially true of religious art and of its highest manifestation, sacred art.” It also says:

For this reason Holy Mother Church has always been the patron of the fine arts and has ever sought their noble ministry, to the end especially that all things set apart for use in divine worship should be worthy, becoming and beautiful, signs and symbols of things supernatural.

Father Jerome Heyndrickx, CICM has actively promoted religious art and encouraged contact with non-Christian artists. He said,

We know that art of various kinds: sculpture, painting, music etc. is all an expression of the local culture, and can produce valuable works of art from this culture. It is not just an ephemeral or changeable thing. Therefore why not make Hua Ming Press into a centre for promoting Christian art?"

In response to the above, "The Committee for the Exhibition of Sacred Art," made up of eight internationally renowned artists and two priests, was formed to promote the first "Exhibition of Sacred Art," held during the Easter season in 1980. The artists on the committee were Xi Murong, Ma Tianfei (deceased), Chen Qimao, Guo Mingqiao, Xu Baolin (deceased), Shu Zengzhi, Yang Yingfeng (deceased), and Ou Haonian. The two priests were Fathers Lei Huanzhang and Zhao Yabo. Since 1980, there have been eight "Sacred Art Exhibits" displaying the works of such Christian artists as Wu Daoyuan, Chen Meijin, Hu Baolin, Liu Hebei, Li Xianshu (deceased), Hu Kemin, Guo Ren, Guo Weimei, Jiang Xin, Wang Ruimin, Li Yuejiang, Le Yiping, Jian Yuanzhong, Cheng Ruiqiao, Luo Cuimo, Pang Meiling, Zhao Shumin, Ren Yifang (deceased), Lu Ying, Zhang Yunju, Shen Shoumei, Ling Lingxian, Mou Chongsong, Xu Weixi, Fu Zhengcai, Lin Ruoyu, Wang Zhaolin, Yao Zhaoming (deceased), He Yu, Yang Jingxue and Hong Sunxian

These exhibits were titled "Love and Life," "Blessings," "The Way," "Instruments Used in the Mass," "Worship of Creation," "Peace," and "Compassion." Non-Christian artists also responded to this opportunity to honor God through their art. These included Zhu Ming, Hou Jinshui, Shi Yuqi (deceased), Xie Dongliang, Chen Song, Zhang Shubai, Zhang Jiyu, Yu Dacheng, Wang Yimeng, Wang Zhuangwei, Wang Junyi, Jin Nili, Liang Danfeng, Zhang Hui, Zhang Yongning, Zeng Shengjun, Xu Weizhong, Zhou Liqiang, Xu Zhenyong, Chen Zipo, Chen Kuicheng (deceased), Ma Liangxuan,

Sun Jingzhi, Qiu Cixun, Tao Shoubai, Cai Rongyou, Cai Kunxi, Li Zhongzhong, Zhu Xiang (deceased), Chen Zongzhen, Zheng Xixi, Chen Yuqing, Guo Qingzhi, Chen Cunming, Liu Mingwu, Lou Yongju, Wen Zhai, Zheng Zhengqing, Weng Canlong, Yang Huilong and others. Their works were really outstanding. Through calligraphy, Chinese and Western painting, embroidery, ceramics, and paper-cutting, they used their special skills to express the deepest feelings of their Chinese hearts. In these works, one sensed a real blending of worship and art!

There have been some outstanding works of art in each of the eight art exhibits which have been held to date. Examples of these are: Yang Yingfeng's "Compassionate Light Shining Throughout the World" and "Holy Light," Ou Haonian's "The Prayer in the Garden" and "Christ the Good Shepherd," Chen Meijin's "Mother and Child," Guo Mingqiao's "Sacred Chalice," Hou Jinyun's "Love," Shi Yuqi's "Five Beatitudes," Chen Cunming's "Fourth Station of the Cross," Zhang Jiyu and Li Yuejiang's cooperative effort "President Jiang Reading the Bible," Zhu Ming's "Statue of Christ," Zeng Shenjun's "Divine Protection," Qiu Cixun's "Good Shepherd," Wang Junyu's "Mother and Child under the Pines," Zhou Liqiang's "The Way," Xu Weizhong's "Ransom," Liu Mingru's "Genesis" and "Entrance into Jerusalem," and Yang Zhenyi's "In Mother's Bosom." Each piece was a product of wisdom, each revealed the innate feelings of a Chinese artist. They were symbols at once elegant, harmonious and beautiful to the eye.

I recall the "Second Exhibition of Sacred Art," which was held in the Hualian County Cultural Center; the theme was "Love and Life." The County magistrate, Wu Shuiyun, viewed the exhibition twice. He was moved to utter these words of praise for it: "These works of art are very meaningful and the theme is quite right. For our society is just lacking in "love" and in "respect for human life. Therefore crimes of murder and violence continue unabated." Magistrate Wu expressed the wish that all the citizens of the county would come to view the exhibit and be influenced by it.

The "Fourth Exhibition of Sacred Art," with the theme of "The Way," was held at the Yong Fu Elementary School in Tainan. The mayor of Tainan, Su Nancheng, conscientiously studied each work of art and carefully listened to the explanations. Afterwards he enthusiastically exclaimed: "This exhibition of religious art is not only valuable artistically, but it transmits a message meaningful for

life, namely, follow the straight path!” Mayor Su indicated that he would like to be on the preparation committee for the next art exhibition. He also suggested that a large-scale revival meeting be held in Tainan, in conjunction with the art exhibit, and for this he would make the Tainan City Gymnasium available for our use. He suggested: “Besides the dynamic revival meeting and the quiet art exhibit, why not display all the sacred articles and scriptures of the Catholic Church, so that many more people can know about the Catholic Church.” Moreover, after viewing the exhibition of sacred art, the art teacher at Taoyuan’s Zhen Sheng Middle School began to study Catholic doctrine. Isn’t this one of the good effects of the sacred art exhibitions?

After our eight exhibitions of Christian art, Christian art associations in other countries have gotten in touch with us. For instance, Christian Art Limited from England wrote asking for Chinese-style Christmas paintings. Later, Dr. Mees, Chief Editor of the largest Catholic art magazine in Europe, visited Taiwan twice to study the situation of Christian art here. He bought a lot of woodcuts and a Chinese-style Stations of the Cross from the woodcut artist Chen Qimao. He also purchased a set of pictures depicting scenes from the Rosary from the paper-cut artist Shi Yuqi. At the same time, the Asian Christian Art Association, which is based in Japan, invited members of the preparatory committee for the exhibitions of Sacred Art to participate in the annual general meeting of their association, which took place that year in Manila. They also cordially invited us to become members of the Asian Christian Art Association. This was another good result of the sacred art exhibitions.

The Plight of Those Engaged in Sacred Art Work

All artists are sensitive and comparatively stubborn people. Once they are convinced of the need to create a Chinese Christian sacred art, they are willing to sacrifice themselves for this ideal. All they need is some sign of encouragement and appreciation. They want a sympathetic ear to listen to them as they describe their struggle to create a work of art. They want their art works collected and space to display them. Unfortunately, some church leaders do not seem too interested or concerned. Some even criticize the works as being immature and unworthy of being called “Christian art.” Such attitudes discourage and dishearten both the chief supporters of

Sacred Art, the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (CICM), and the co-workers who work untiringly to set up these exhibits.

What is really regrettable is that several world-renowned artists from the committee such as, Yang Yingfeng (an artist who sculptures landscapes), Ou Haonian (a master in the Lingnan School of traditional Chinese art), Guo Mingqiao (an artist who works with cloisonne), Xu Baolin (a professor of oil painting at Taiwan Normal University), and others, are not appreciated nor resorted to by the Church. For instance, when Fujen University started a Department of Applied Art, these artists were not invited to display their works. When churches were being built around Taiwan, they were neither consulted nor invited to offer suggestions, nor asked to serve on the planning committee. When they were erecting a statue of Our Lady at the Wufengqi pilgrimage site in Ilan County, they did not invite a native artist to sculpt the statue. A Chinese artist of sacred art could have given the statue special characteristics of Wufengqi and designed it in accord with the account of the person who witnessed the appearance of Our Lady. Instead they purchased a Western-style statue of Our Lady.

Recently when the Bishops' Conference announced that they needed a "sacred painting" of the "Blessed Martyrs of China," not only did they not consult with the Korean Church, but they invited a foreigner to do a Western-style oil painting, devoid of any Chinese flavor.

On February 28, 1984, Our Holy Father John Paul II received the seven Taiwan bishops at the Vatican. During the meeting, he encouraged them by saying, "...the truth of Christ that you have to proclaim reaches people as they are. You have the task of translating the message of faith into terms that can be understood by your compatriots near or far." He went on to say: "You belong to a great people....A people great not only by its number but above all by reason of its culture and its values" (taken from the English Edition of the *Osservatore Romano*, March 12, 1984, p. 10). If Catholic doctrine and Chinese culture could be blended together, this would create something beautiful for humanity.

The manifestation of Chinese culture in literature, art, architecture and music is rich, harmonious and fascinating. Four hundred years ago Father Matteo Ricci had the same impression. So he wore the robes of a Chinese intellectual, built Chinese style

churches and used Chinese to preach the Gospel to the people. Later at Fujen University Cardinal Costantini positively encouraged the training of Catholic artists. Some of these were Chen Ludu, Lu Hongnian, Wang Xiaoda, Hua Luoia and Li Mingyuan. At last the practice of sculpting Chinese-style statues and painting Chinese-style pictures was inaugurated. Cardinal Costantini also encouraged the construction of several churches and seminaries, displaying a profusion of Chinese architectural designs. Some of these were: the cathedral of the Anguo Diocese, the major seminary in Kaifeng, and Emmaus House of the Discipuli Domini Congregation in Xuanhua. These buildings not only displayed the elegance and refinement of Chinese culture, but they gave a visitor the feeling that the Church was at one with the Chinese people.■

The Nativity



Chinese ink painting.
By Monica Liu, 1997

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