

Reflections of an Artist

by Paul Zhang

translated by Norman Walling, S.J.

When I was studying at Zhejiang's Academy of Fine Arts (now The Chinese Academy of Fine Arts), I remember that all of us fellow students—young people in our twenties—who came from all over the country, had a tremendous enthusiasm for art. Once we had some knowledge and understanding of our artistic abilities, we began to discover, in our search for personal artistic development, that new demands were constantly being made on us. Soon we were no longer satisfied with classroom exercises or just copying human models; what we needed was to have a spark of new life breathed into us.

Interest in Western modern art often led me, along with two or three of my friends, to abandon our classroom work and go the library. There we searched through books on painting and modern art magazines to see what was going on in the world of modern art abroad and to find out what other young artists were doing in China. I recall that the young Chinese artists who attracted me most were *The Artist of the Stars* and *The Fellow from Xiamen* as well as the young artists who were the vanguard of modern art abroad. These were Anselm Kiffer, Francis Bacon, Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Beuys, Joseph Kosurth, and others. These vanguard young artists belonged to different schools: *Art of Poverty*, *Art of the Land*, *Art of Chance*, *Conceptual Art*, etc. We knew very little about these

In those days in China to get hold of material on foreign artists was not easy. Our eagerness at that time to understand art currents remains a vivid memory. Perhaps it was this interest that led me to discover, compare, and study those border areas existing between Chinese and Western art.

In October of 1993 I said goodbye to my parents, relatives, friends, and to Beijing where I was born and grew up. I arrived with a mixture of curiosity and excitement in Milan, Italy, a city strangely foreign to me.

Milan, in northern Italy, is a modern European city and one of Italy's most important industrial centers. It is also the hub of modern fashion design and banking. Shortly after my arrival I set out

on a personal sight seeing tour. In China I could only use art magazines and slide projectors to experience the art works of Western masters. In Italy I could see the originals. I went everywhere to view as much as I could. I visited museums, art galleries, and all kinds of exhibitions. I went to churches, parks—anywhere I thought might have connections with art. I also traveled to most of the important Italian cities: Rome, Florence, Venice, and to the ancient ruins of Pompeii. These left a very deep impression on me.

Since art knows no national boundaries, I knew that we should not only study and preserve our own art traditions, but also give serious study towards understanding and integrating the traditions of Western art. There is no other way to make progress. The rapid proliferation of information, communication and transportation networks, no longer allows a culture to develop, as in the past, limited to one locality or in one mode only. On the contrary, the development of culture has become international transcending local situations. This is especially true in this century that keeps reaching out to ever wider horizons. Culture is constantly developing and changing amidst the process of rejecting and critiquing, then rejecting again and critiquing again. Modern Chinese who want today's Chinese art to build on its traditions, yet to venture out in new directions to find fresh life and vitality, must break free from the limitations of national boundaries and make wider use of positive elements found in Western art.

Many scholars have studied the differences between Chinese and Western art and so there is no need for me to add anything here. I shall only speak of my experiences during my stay in Italy.

Italy was the source of Roman culture and the Renaissance. The Greeks for their part colonized areas of Southern Italy. Everywhere in Italy there are places of historic interest and scenic beauty. The Italians are very protective of their ancient cultural monuments and show great care in maintaining and repairing them. This means that most of the paintings, sculptures, and buildings dating from ancient Roman times, the middle ages and the Renaissance are still in quite good condition today. The city of Pompeii that slept hidden under volcanic ash for 19 centuries once again sees the light of the sun. Michaelangelo's Sistine Chapel, after undergoing renovation, now appears in all its former splendor. Da Vinci's "Last Supper" is presently undergoing a delicate clean up and repainting job. In many Italian cities ancient wall frescoes and old

Calligraphy, the art of writing beautifully, is highly prized among China's art forms. Examples of this highly decorative handwriting are always found in Chinese art exhibits.



Unending Love for God (Calligraphy)

By Jiang Xin

愛主不渝 (草書) 姜新作 38 x 33.5 cm

churches are being renovated. I cannot help but think of my own country's attitude towards preserving the cultural treasures handed down to us from our ancestors. In past years, great devastation followed every dynastic change. The recent "Cultural Revolution" tried to make a "clean sweep" of the past. We have no idea just how many historical and cultural relics were destroyed. This is indeed a very painful thought. Fortunately, the present generation is more aware of the need to preserve the past and has already taken steps to remedy the situation, but there is still a great deal to be done.

In the West, besides preserving and restoring ancient cultural relics, there is also a great interest in creating a modern culture and modern art. Many cultural funding agencies and associations show interest in Eastern cultures. The development of the modern Western industrial society has created a depressing materialism and consumerism that, in varying degrees, has weakened its spirit and threatened the social order and moral standards. This has led many Western scholars to raise the cry of "Return to nature". They have begun to study and recommend the integral, total, interior, contemplative and spiritual aspects of Eastern philosophers who are at one with nature. They wish to take them as correctives to the crisis facing Western civilization. They study, analyze, and translate the philosophies of Laozi and Zhuangzi, Zen Buddhism and other such Eastern systems of thought. This learning, assimilating, and merging of elements from other cultures in the field of art is quite common.

In Italy I took part in many exhibitions. Three of these deeply impressed me. The first was the March 1997 modern art exhibit held by the Milan Association for Promoting the Arts. Six young artists from Italy, Australia, Greece, South Korea, and myself took part. The main exhibits consisted of free-form sculptures and videos. The second was the July 1997 exhibit organized by the Study Center for Oriental Culture in Genoa. This was "The First Bi-Annual Exhibit on Modern Asia". Thirteen Asian artists took part: six from Japan, three from South Korea, and four from China. Song Gang, Zhen Rong, He Lei and myself. The main exhibits included calligraphy, paintings, traditional and free-form sculptures. Thirdly, in January 1998 Antonio D'Vossa, an art critic, in conjunction with the Milan Art Center, sponsored an exhibit called "Visual Rave". It was a large scale modern art exhibit with a hundred artists from many countries taking part. The works of art consisted of paintings, poetry, music, traditional and free-form sculptures, videos as well as

artistic photos. The reason these three exhibits deeply impressed me was that they gave an overall view of the arts, independent of national boundaries, fixed formulas, nationality, and ethnic origins. The exhibition showed how the arts interpenetrate and merge—something very much in line with my own artistic inclinations.

Moreover, I have discovered that the complex content from other exhibitions like the two biannual exhibitions of 1995 and 1997 in Venice, the 10th Art Exhibition at Caserta, the 6th biennial Art Exhibition in Genoa, along with the many other more ordinary art exhibitions which I attended, need careful observation and evaluation. Otherwise, I could easily lose my sense of direction and just drift along with the tide.

Western logic, analyzes systems of thought. This characteristic is expressed in separating, summarizing, and specializing on different levels. Modern Western art, following this spirit of logical analysis and an attitude that denies critical values, along with a “devil may care” spirit of bold innovation and experimentation, brings forth, in soil free of any restrictions, manifold fruits that “lets a 100 flowers bloom and a thousand schools contend.” Art comes out of the human condition that genuinely wants to feel and directly experience the creation of art. But doesn't today's art sometimes pass off what is sham as genuine, or overlook extremism in expression? On the other hand is it not possible for extremism to distance art too far from its original spirit. Shouldn't we return to that “unity between the person and the universe” that existed among the ancient cultures and which kept them close to nature?

Today people's spiritual impulses are threatened. The widespread search for material wealth, the alienation caused by modern science, the rapid communication systems, the constant and universal appearance of new products carry in their wake a sense of urgency and anxiety. This gives us fewer and fewer occasions to find a reasonable position compatible with thought and reflection. However no one can escape from going on this spiritual search. New spiritual values must come forth to meet this new age. We must lay hold of an ultimate spiritual harmony, find the place where our true self exists. Perhaps we shall find nothing, but we must undertake this journey nonetheless. The process may entail a great deal of struggle.

The journey is more interesting than the destination; the struggle more stimulating than the final victory or defeat. When I

arrive at my final destination and achieve that final goal, I shall feel an inexpressible “emptiness” To flee from this “emptiness” I will have to undertake another journey, begin a new struggle, otherwise I shall be overwhelmed by this emptiness.

Now, let us in freedom, sincerity and a sense of responsibility and with courage animate one another to progress along the path of creating an art that is a union between heaven and humanity, and at one with the universe.



Cripta, by Paul Zhang, cm 150X150. Oil, acrylic and ink on paper, 1996.