

Traversing Continents: Perspectives on Inculturation from a South Asian Artist, Angela Trindade

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Abstract: Rooted in her South Asian culture and motivated by her own faith convictions, Angela Trindade (1909-1980) contributions as an artist working on two continents (Asia and North America) during the mid-twentieth century provide visual evidence and valued insights for inculturation, demonstrating ways for Christianity to be enriched. She affirmed and advocated for the traditional role of artist in her culture as a translator and evangelizer of Christianity. She encouraged the incorporation of her culture's unique aesthetic structures and sensibilities to convey the precepts of the Christian faith. And she conceived fresh iconographic forms and idioms in transmitting the Christian message. She articulated this approach as she traveled between India and the United States, through her exhibitions and lectures and also through her writings that appeared on the pages of *Liturgical Arts*, a journal circulating in the United States prior to and post Vatican II. Trindade's strategies contributed to moving nascent ideas about inculturation and art forward among Catholic theologians, artists and architects, and clergy and laity in parishes and diocesan offices throughout the United States.

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[摘要] 植根於她的南亞文化，並受自身信仰的激勵，安吉拉·千達德 (Angela Trindade, 1909-1980) 是一名在二十世紀中葉在兩大洲 (即亞洲和北美洲) 工作的藝術家。她在基督宗教本地化方面作出了貢獻，特別是在視覺藝術方面提供了寶貴的見解，展示了基督宗教更豐盛的一面。她肯定並倡導藝術家在她的文化中作為基督宗教的翻譯者和福音傳播者的傳統角色。她鼓勵將她的文化中獨特的審美結構和情感結合起來，以傳達基督宗教信仰的戒律。她在傳播基督宗教信息時構思了新的圖像形式和方言。當她遊走在印度和美國之間時，她通過展覽和講座，以及在《禮儀藝術》期刊上發表文章，闡明了這種方法，該期刊在梵二前後在美國流通。特林達德的策略有助於在美國各地的天主教神學家、藝術家和建築師，以及堂區和教區辦事處的神職人員和平信徒之中推動有關本地化和藝術的新思想。

My desire is to devote my life to the study of the Hindu forms for expressing thought—especially religious thought—so that I may be able to bring my people nearer to Christianity through works of art. In this way, I hope I may help to make Christianity a far-reaching influence in India, bringing to the simplest and the most intellectual alike, the realization that in Christian thought and teaching is to be found the fullness of Divine Revelation. This it is that the Indian people have been seeking in their hearts throughout the centuries.² ~Angela Trindade, 1951

These words from Indian artist Angela Trindade (1909-1980) were expressed in an essay that appeared in the November 1953 issue of *Liturgical Arts*. *Liturgical Arts: A Quarterly Dedicated to the Arts of the Church* was a journal published in the United States between 1931 and 1972 that now provides a unique source documenting unfolding issues related to Christian art and architecture throughout the twentieth century. These discussions included topics surrounding modernism and abstraction, as well as questions pertaining to inculturation in an increasingly globally connected world. The journal was an initiative of the Liturgical Arts Society established in 1927 by a group of architects and artists on the east coast of the United

2 This quote from Indian artist, Angela Trindade appeared in “Christian Art for India”, *Liturgical Arts* 22.1 (November 1953): 12-13. The essay was initially titled, “Art in the Service of the Church: Christian Artists Strive to Bring Understanding of Our Faith Through Works of Brush and Chisel” and was published in *The Shield* 30.4 (January 1951): 3, 25-27. CLIT 119/01. University of Notre Dame Archives (Hereafter, UNDA).

States who desired to provide a forum in which liturgical, theological, and practical issues related to sacred art and architecture would be discussed.³ Ample photographs in each issue showcased pioneering ecclesial architecture and exemplary religious art. Maurice Lavanoux (1894-1974), one of the founders of the Liturgical Art Society and editor of *Liturgical Arts* over its forty-year existence, described the aim of the journal “to make the flowering of the Church’s cultural heritage, including the liturgy, more effective and fertile in the modern intellectual and artistic life of the United States.”⁴

What also emerges in examining the trajectory of the journal’s publications, is evidence of the ways in which the discussion about inculturation became more central over the span of its duration. Initially, the writings focused on the legacy of western and eastern European religious art and architecture and drew on regional expressions throughout the United States. Then, beginning in 1950, indigenization, and its analogous term inculturation was progressively moved to the forefront by the editor Maurice Lavanoux whose world travels, particularly through Latin America and Asia, motivated him to include perspectives from scholars, artists, liturgists, theologians, and artists, locally and abroad.

3 For a comprehensive and in-depth study of the Liturgical Arts Society see Susan White, *Art, Architecture, and Liturgical Reform: The Liturgical Arts Society (1928-1972)* (New York: Pueblo Publishing, 1990).

4 White, *Art, Architecture and Liturgical Reform*, p. 80.

In this brief essay, I will spotlight the work of Angela Trindade, a South Asian artist, whose essays and art were illuminated on the pages of the November 1953 issue of *Liturgical Arts*. Her insights warranted attention then, and still hold credence today. Through Trindade's reproduced art and written essays, she argued for three ways artists were instrumental in interpreting the Christian message. She honored and advocated for the traditional role of artist in her culture as a translator and evangelizer of Christianity. She promoted incorporating her culture's unique aesthetic structures and sensibilities to translate precepts of the Christian faith. And she affirmed the efficacy and fluency of using iconographic language understood and appreciated by Indian and Christian audiences. With zeal, she articulated these ideas in her writing and provided evidence through her art that when infused with fresh cultural meanings, the Christian message is enriched. In this way, she can be appreciated as a twentieth century advocate of inculturation whose connections to India and the United States contributed to promoting the contextualization of the Christian story.

Angela Trindade was born in 1909 in Bombay, India and raised in Goa. She was the daughter of an Indian artist, Antonio Xavier Trindade. Her father renowned as "The Rembrandt of the East," was accomplished and skilled in an occidental style of art. As a young student of art in India, Trindade was also trained in western European art. She was schooled in realism and experimented with abstract expressionism and cubism. However, she continued to pursue Indian aesthetics, maintained

an interest in Tantric Art, and committed herself to the study of Indian literature.⁵ As a Christian from Goa, she allied herself with other artists such as Angelo da Fonseca (1910-1967), dedicated to analyzing the problems surrounding the Christian message and local culture.⁶

Angela Trindade's first appearance in the United States is documented in a letter dated February 8, 1948, to Hildreth Meiere, the president of the Liturgical Arts Society. Trindade announced her upcoming visit in spring of 1948 and requested assistance from the Society to arrange a lecture or assistance with organizing an exhibition during her extended visit. She mentions how her paintings were published in India, Europe, and Canada. Among her references were Rev. Fr. Heras SJ, from St. Xavier's College, Bombay an authority on ancient Indian culture and

5 For a recent biography, see Fátima da Silva Gracias, *Angela Trindade: A Trinity of Light, Colour and Emotion* (Panjim, Goa: Fundação Oriente, India, 2016).

6 Angelo da Fonseca initially took up medical studies in Bombay, but soon discovered his artistic vocation at the J.J. School of Art and in Santiniketan, Bengal. His support and inspiration came from Fr. H. Heras, SJ (1888-1955) who encouraged his interpretation of Christian themes through Indian symbols and artistic styles and commissioned him to paint scenes of Jesuit mission history. See Peter Armacost, "Angelo da Fonseca," in *Oxford Encyclopedia of South Asian Christianity*, ed. Roger E. Hedlund, et.al. (Oxford University Press, 2012), <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198073857.001.0001/acref-9780198073857-e-0380?rskey=UZOEJf&result=5> (accessed 5 October 2021)

languages.⁷ Upon arrival in the United States, she settled with the Medical Mission Sisters on the east coast. Trindade writes a letter of introduction directly to Maurice Lavanoux, the editor of *Liturgical Arts* on September 24, 1949. In this letter she includes photographs of her work with information that she has over 150 additional watercolors and a request for information about the art galleries in New York. In the letter she addresses her Portuguese last name and explains her ethnicity. She goes on to explain how the European missionary strived to westernize Catholic converts in her region with religious articles, statues and pictures imported from Europe, but noted their “egotistical domination” and shortsightedness in not visualizing the future. “Not one single Indian artist has tried to represent Christ and Madonna in Indian style all these centuries. We took these names, adopted the dress and way of living of the west and the result was that we have no culture or art if we can call our own since then.” She added a P.S. to her letter. “Now I wear the Indian Sari.”⁸ Lavanoux responded by inviting her to write an article for the *Journal*, facilitated invitations for lectures, and linked her to exhibition venues. The opportunities that transpired, provide a window into Trindade’s perspectives on inculturation and the Christian message.

7 Letter of A. Trindade to Hildreth Meiere, February 8, 1948. CLIT 25/01. UNDA.

8 Letter of A. Trindade to Maurice Lavanoux, September 24, 1949. CLIT 119/1. UNDA.

Rooted in Indian Culture

As a Christian artist from India, Trindade viewed her artistic mission rooted in the ancient role of artist for the people. For Indian artists, beauty was spiritual and an expression of a religious ideal and zeal born of rich imagination, “born of spirit and not of matter.”⁹ Indian artists underwent a rigorous discipline and mastered the art of self-surrender to their calling and profession. For this reason, the artist was considered an inspired seer, and not a mere technician, with the ability to bring to the common people the meaning of the Hindu religion. Trindade explained how her work as an artist was inspired by her contemporary, Mahatma Gandhi, with his doctrine of *ahimsa* (self-sacrifice) and the power of love which conquers evil, fear, and want. She asserted that “This becomes possible when one is nurtured in a culture and heritage like the one of India, as India has always stood for tolerance on all sides and believes that everyone seeking truth eventually finds I however obscure be his viewpoint from another. This form of inward courtesy, gentleness of soul and compassion to another man’s point of view is truly to be emulated by all of us who wish to follow the path of Truth.”¹⁰ She saw art, not as an end, but a means of addressing humanity. She understood her role as working to bring Christ to the people of India. “I was inspired to paint Christ and the Madonna in Indian style, so that the Indians could understand that Christ is the supreme embodiment of sacrifice and love.”¹¹

9 Angela Trindade, Essay/Lecture, August 15, 1963. CLIT 95/25,4. UNDA.

10 *Ibid.*, Essay/Lecture, 2

11 Trindade, “Art in the Service of the Church”, pp. 3, 25-27.

As an artist, Trindade also drew from an Indian aesthetic shaped by Hindu philosophy. “My paintings emphasize the concept that beauty is of the spirit and not of matter. They follow the six limbs or codes of art observed by the ancient artists, which were written in the *Silpa Shastras* — one of the four great books of India — nearly 1600 years ago. These codes have been interpreted by me in an abstract form, the triangle to represent the Trinity which the ancient sages proclaimed to be the source of all arts. This abstract form is visualized made real interpretation.”¹² Inspired by this Indian tradition and the parallels between Brahma, God the Father, Vishnu, God the son and Shiva, God the Holy Ghost she used the triangle in her painting as a foundational compositional form to reflect the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. “This brings to the understanding, the fatherhood of God, in God the Father, the brotherhood of man, in God the Son and enlightenment through God the Holy Spirit, who gives to mankind wisdom and love.”¹³ Thus, Trindade not only subsumed the virtues entrusted to artists in her culture, she also sought to honor and incorporate fundamental aesthetic structures and sensibilities that were then translated into a Christian idiom.

12 Angela Trindade, “Art Expresses Her Faith”, no date. CLIT 95/26, UNDA.

13 Angela Trindade, “Exhibition of Sacred Art”, Ashoka Hotel, New Delhi. The brochure was written by Trindade, also documents the titles of 19 oil paintings and 41 watercolors which were included in her first exhibition of sacred art held in Delhi, September 29, 1960. CLIT 95/26. UNDA.

A third strategy was Trindade's use of iconography. She recognized that the idiom of symbols had a universal appeal and were a means reinforcing beliefs, while conveying to a broad audience the inner meaning of faith in a non-discursive way. Her fluency with both South Asian and Christian iconography was apparent and employed effectively. By utilizing this duplicative approach, the underlying meanings and precepts of Christianity were understood and received by her audience. For example, in Indian culture, the image of the lotus held great significance. For Hindu and Buddhist communities the lotus is a symbol of purity and is recognized as the ground and substance of existence. In the water, the lotus represents what is permanent and eternal amid the instability of earthly life. "Now the symbol of the lotus is most appropriate in Christian art, too," Trindade explained. "The roots and bulb of the lotus are in the mud and slime at the bottom of filthy water; and yet up from these depths rises the glorious blossom opening above in lovely spotless glory. What could more beautifully express the great truth of the Incarnation of Christ—raising human nature to a divine dignity—than the lotus growing up out of the mud and blossoming into a glorious immaculate flower!"¹⁴

The eye of the fish, which is never closed was used to represent the eye of God. Depiction of eyes without lids suggests that God is always attentive to our needs. Used in conjunction with images of Mary and the saints, the open eye represented the singleness of vision of the saint—the

14 Trindade, "Art in the Service of the Church", p. 26.

eye of the soul turned always to God.¹⁵ Also seen in her paintings are depiction of hand gestures or *mudras*, which communicate to the viewer a sense of significant emotions and energy. Her use of color drew on a cultural idiom familiar to the viewer. Orange signified the color of ascetics or holy persons; green was the color for fertility and unity; and white symbolized purity. “The human mind,” explained Trindade, “with its limitations has a need for visual aid to feel and experience the things of Divine origin which are beyond the scope of our human intellect. Enabling the human eye to perceive in human form that which is divine and beautiful is one of the greatest achievements of an art.”¹⁶

Artists Contributed Towards Evangelization

As a South Asian Christian woman traversing continents during the mid-twentieth century, Angela Trindade articulated the vital role that artists contributed towards evangelization. Her early insights find resonance in John Paul II’s 1998 *Ecclesia in Asia* Apostolic Exhortation. Section 22 of this document speaks to the challenges and gifts of inculturation:

Culture is the vital space within which the human person comes face to face with the Gospel. Just as a culture is the result of the life and activity of a human group, so the persons belonging to that group are shaped to a large extent by the culture in which they live. As persons and

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁶ Angela Trindade, Essay/Lecture, August 15, 1963. CLIT 95/25, 4. UNDA.

societies change, so too does the culture change with them. As a culture is transformed, so too are persons and societies transformed by it. From this perspective, it becomes clearer why evangelization and inculturation are naturally and intimately related to each other.¹⁷

In 1955, Angela Trindade was awarded the “*Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice*,” an honor bestowed by Pope Pius XII for her contribution to the field of religious art. Trindade’s words and images traversed continents as she advocated for the inculturation of images. In the process, she left a body of visual evidence which fused Hindu iconography with Christian themes. She acknowledged the role of the artist within her culture, drew on fundamental aesthetic structures imbued with her own sensibilities, and utilized fresh iconographic forms and idioms in transmitting the Christian message. Rooted in her Indian culture, motivated by her own faith convictions, her contribution as an artist demonstrates a way Christianity continues to be enriched.

17 John Paul II, *Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Ecclesia in Asia*, 1998. This document summarizes ideas and conclusions of the Special Asian Synod held in Rome from April 18 to May 14, 1998, providing a blueprint for the expansion of the Roman Catholic faith in Asia. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_06111999_ecclesia-in-asia.html. [Accessed 20 August 2021].

Appendix: Angela Trindade's Three Images



Our Lady of Prosperity (GLIT-52-20-04R)

In this image, Mary is portrayed in a *sari*, seated with her son Jesus, in *dhoti* trousers. A traditional five wick lamp is positioned in the lower corners before the two holy figures. In Hindu tradition, the *diya*, or five wick lamp is a commonly used for prayer, signifying purity, goodness, and

power. The symbolism in this picture is explained by Angela Trindade in the following manner: *“Seated on a royal throne and bedecked with a royal crown, Our Lady holds the Child Jesus on her lap in the Indian fashion. He is “Sarveshvara,” – “the Lord of Everything.” Everything is in Our Lady’s possession; hence, she is Our Lady of Prosperity. But she is already to give us this great treasure, as the position of her right hand tells us; this position is known as “pataka mudra”— “the hand of liberality.” The Child Jesus is presented as a “Mahaguru” — “Great Teacher”—who is already teaching us, as is indicated by the position of His right hand (open palm with fingers extended forward). Yet, in spite of the spiritual riches, Our Lady gazes out at us with an expression of pity and grief because so many people, distracted with the things of this world, do not hear the lessons taught by her Divine Son. The five flaming wicks in the two lamps at left and right recall the “five prosperities” which are made famous in Sanskrit Classical writings.”*

This caption appeared with this illustration in the essay, “Art in the Service of the Church: Christian Artists Strive to Bring Understanding of Our Faith Through Works of Brush and Chisel,” published in *The Shield* Vol. 30, No. 4. January 1951, (25). CLIT 119/01. UNDA.

Image courtesy of University of Notre Dame Archives.



The Assumption of Mary (GLIT-52-20-06R)

Angela Trindade creates an auspicious environment by depicting figures adorned in festive clothing, flowers, and playing musical instruments. The wind instrument (shehnai) is widely used during processions and in temples. One figure plays a two-sided barrel drum (*mridangam* or *dholak*), another a string instrument (tanpura). Several women each add to the celebratory nature of the event by each playing pairs of small cymbals (*manjira* or *taal*). In the left corner a woman honors the sanctity of the occasion by holding a lotus blossom symbolizing purity.

Black and white image: GLIT-52-20-06R, UNDA. Image courtesy of University of Notre Dame Archives.

For more information on a colour version of this image, see: Anand Amaladass, SJ and Gudrun Löwner, *Christian Themes in Indian Art* (New Delhi, India: Ajay Kumar Jain for Manohar Publishers: 2012), 210.



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A. Trindade, Bombay

*Queen of Heaven with Our Lady
standing on the moon*

Medical Mission Sisters, Fox Chase, Phila. Pa.

Queen of Heaven with Our Lady Standing on the Moon
(CLIT-119-018-04A)

In Christian art, the Virgin is commonly depicted standing on a crescent moon, referencing Revelations 12:1 “A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head.” In this image Angela Trindade’s use of color is evident. She draws from the Varnika Bhanga, one of the six limbs or ancient spiritual and aesthetic foundation for Hindu painting, which she claimed “reflects an idealism born of spirit and not of matter.” “Varnika Bhanga does not merely mean the mixing and using of primary and secondary colours, but also the whole and real nature and meaning of colours, figures, lettering..., etc. and the proper delineation and description seen and felt. [. . .] Our eyes merely see the colours but our mind feels the music and the perfume of colour.”

From Angela Trindade, “Essay/Lecture”, August 15, 1963, (10-11). CLIT 95/25. UNDA.

Image courtesy of University of Notre Dame Archives.