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# Interpreting Christ Through Indian Art

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Interpreting Christ through Indian art is a pioneering work.<sup>1</sup> Not much has been written about this subject. The present article does not include the field of the written word. Even in the field of fine arts it is restricted to painting. This is done partly out of necessity.

'It is remarkable—and painful at the same time—to notice that when reading the many books on Indian Art one never comes across a single illustration or mentioning of a Christian monument. You find Hindu temples and sculptures by the

## <sup>1</sup>Bibliography

For contemporary Christian painting in India cf.:

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A. da Fonseca, 'Indo-Christian Art in Painting and Statuary—A historical Retrospect', in *Indica*, 1953, pp. 139-153.

E. L. King, *The Art of Angelo da Fonseca*, pp. 34, the Wesley Press and Publishing House, Mysore City, 1949, (Reprint from *Indian Christian Endeavour*, July 1948 to April 1949)

Matthew Lederle, S. J., 'Art India, Christian Paintings in Indian Style (Experience of a Publisher)', in *Jeevadhara*, 1971, pp. 274-284.

A. Lehmann, *Die Kunst der jungen Kirchen*, Evangelische Verlagsantalt, Berlin, 1955.

—, *Afroasiatische christliche Kunst, Mit 282 Abbildungen*, pp. 285, Evangelische Verlagsantalt, Berlin, 1966. This book is translated by E. Hopka, J. E. Nopola and O. E. Sohn as *Christian Art in Africa and Asia*, Concordia Publishing House, Saint Louis, 1966.

Felix zu Loewenstein, *Christliche Bilder in altindischer Malerei*, pp. 76, Aschendorffsche Verlagshandlung, Muenster, 1958.

Sepp Schueller, *Christliche Kunst aus fernen Laendern*, Mosella Verlag, Duesseldorf 1939, pp. 72.

—, *Angelo da Fonseca, India's Catholic Artists*, pp. 16, Wilhelm Metz, Aachen, 1938.

thousands, Buddhist pagodas, mosques, towers of silence, Jain temples, etc., but Christianity seems as non-existing, or what would be still worse—unable to produce anything of the sort. Whatever the reasons, this remains a fact to be considered'.<sup>2</sup>

According to the legend St Thomas the Apostle, having received money to erect a building of stone 'went about the cities and villages giving to the poor and teaching them the Good News', and in this way building a dwelling in heaven for the king. Christians in India, too, were concerned more to beautify their heavenly temple than the temples of stone on this earth.

### *Three Main Periods*

Of the three main periods of Christian growth in India, namely, the early centuries, the 16th to 18th centuries, and our modern times we treat more extensively only the third period. About the first period Mathew Moozhyl wrote:

'It is noteworthy that Indian Christian Art existed long before the arrival of the Portuguese in India. The late Fr Henry Heras, S. J. says: "When they (the Portuguese) arrived at the shores of Malabar in the early sixteenth century, they found there numerous Christians,—descendants of those converted in early Christian times by the preaching and example of St Thomas the Apostle—but the Portuguese writer (of the chronicles) naively remarks that their churches resembled in their architecture the Hindu temples they saw in the same land."

To the great loss of Christian archaeology most of those ancient churches have either been ruined or have been demolished to be replaced by churches in Portuguese style. Yet we can find today some examples of the Indian Christian art of the ancient Church of Malabar. Behind the old Church of Kaduthurithi there is a big monolithic cross. Its pedestal is beautifully decorated with lotuses, elephants and other motifs which are usually found on the walls of ancient Hindu temples. So also the carvings on the monolithic baptismal font of the same church bears witness to the fact that the St. Thomas Christians of India made use of the Art of India for the benefit of the church'<sup>3</sup>

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E. H. Slyter (ed.), *Christian Art in India*, The Commission on Christian Literature of the Methodist Church in Southern Asia, pp. 52, Lucknow (about) 1960.

R. W. Taylor, 'Some Interpretations of Jesus in Indian Painting', in *Religion and Society*, 1970 (XVII, No. 3), pp. 78-106.

(The above books and articles are available at the Papal Athenaeum Library, Pune, and 'Art India', De Nobili College, Pune.)

<sup>2</sup> Mathew Moozhyl, S. J., 'Indian Christian Art', in *Pax Romana Journal*, April 1958.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

In the second period there were two distinct artistic efforts to represent Christian themes in India. The first was within the Portuguese territories. We find there, even today, a large variety of buildings, statues and paintings. They are made in the late renaissance and Portuguese Baroque style. The hands of the Indian artists are recognised only in wood and ivory statues. As Baroque in general so also these artistic creations represent an enormous joy of life which wishes to bring the totality of human life to praise, venerate and serve God. The eagerness of modern collectors for pieces of this Indo-Portuguese art is a sign of the quality of some of the products of that period.

Another effort of artistic creation of that period took place outside of the Portuguese territories, mainly at the Moghul court. We can see three stages of an interesting development, namely, imitation, adaptation and new creation. In the beginning local artists merely imitated imported paintings and prints, some of which were of outstanding quality. As printing was unknown to these artists some of them attempted with thin brushes to achieve the same effect as printing by adding dot to dot. Later we see adaptations to local forms and colours. At a still later period a few remarkable works have been produced, a happy blending of Christian content with Indian forms. At present about 60 to 100 paintings of that period are still available. 'But taken as a whole', writes Hermann Goetz, 'European art was outside the Portuguese possessions no more than a whim, like the Chinoiserie of Rococo Europe'.<sup>4</sup>

### *New Cultural Influences*

To understand the work of the artists in our modern period one has to take into consideration the cultural situation at the beginning of English rule in India. It was a time of a total collapse of creativity in India. As regards outside influences Portugal, France and England exerted some cultural influence in India varying with time and place. Only slowly a new interest in Indian cultural traditions awoke along with social reform and the growth of national consciousness.

The discoveries of Graeco-Buddhist (Gandhāra) sculptures in India interested European art lovers. Soon the time would come when Europe would no longer take classic Greek art as the sole standard of beauty. A new romantic renaissance in India helped to vindicate the Indian ideas of beauty and to build up self-respect. The Bengal School of Art—the first modern indigenous Indian school of art—was eclectic, it endeavoured to create a national style of painting. The style of Abanindranath Tagore, influential in the new school of art, was delicate, sentimental, an Indian variant of late Pre-Raphaelism. Abanindranath Tagore was the 'guru' of Angelo da Fonseca, the first important Christian artist of the new period. The new style would soon degenerate; pale sentimentality would be regarded as spirituality. When turning to Indian traditions artists were inspired by the mediæval period (770-1200) and the Indo-Islamic period (1200-1803).

<sup>4</sup> Hermann Goetz, *India, Five Thousand Years of Indian Art*, in *Arts of the World*, Vol. I, p. 236.

In Indian Schools of Art, soon, modern international trends began to exert greater and greater influence.

To understand the work of Christian artists in India it will be of help to consider also the direction of religious artistic work in Europe. In its religious paintings the 18th century brought the beginning of *Kitsch*. This German word connotes an object of little or of no artistic value. In the 19th century the Pre-Raphaelites stood up against this *Kitsch*. Their paintings show a moral striving for truth, genuineness and interiority. They wanted to create noble forms in the service of noble ideas. They opposed Baroque, classicism and romantic subjectivism. In Baroque they fought the overgrowth of non-essentials, in classicism its rigidity of form, and in romantic art its subjectivism, its unrestrained individuality. We know how miserably they and their imitators often failed in the pursuit of their ideal. Many pictures seen in Christian homes and institutions in our country are a proof of this.

The end of the 19th century witnessed the beginning of new forms of secular and religious art. A new experimenting and searching gave rise to impressionism, expressionism, cubism, futurism, classicism, realism, surrealism, etc. Modern art sees the world also as irrational, questionable; it asks for confrontation. Its best artists wish to master their surroundings, remaining true to whatever confronts them. It is true that the modern world is also materialistic, acquisitive and out for exploitation. These aspects, too, became themes for art.

### *Christianity and Painting*

Painting in Christianity can look back on a long history. Artists are influenced by this history. The Old Testament rejected any cultic use of representations. The Ark of the Covenant, however, was the object of cultic veneration. Originally the restrictions referred to the Yahve cult; later there were explicit prohibitions also as regards the making of representations of other gods. The people of the New Testament at first followed the injunctions of their forefathers. But with Christ, the 'image of the invisible God' (Col. 1:15) the old rule was basically changed. Already in the catacombs symbols and then later full representations of Christ were painted.

We find iconoclastic tendencies mainly in three periods of Christian history: from time to time during the Byzantine period, in the Reformation and in our own modern times. The reasons for this iconoclasm differ in each period. The general Roman Catholic position as regards the use of pictures is in the middle between the Orthodox and the Protestant one, between two vastly different attitudes towards the use of cultic pictures. In short, to speak in a very general way, the Catholic position upheld what already the Council of Nikaia 787 had stated and St Thomas Aquinas in substance reaffirmed: There is no obligation to venerate pictures, but one may do it (as one may salute a flag). God, as prototype, deserves absolute adoration, a saint absolute veneration; pictures deserve a relative adoration or veneration. The modern reaction to pictures amongst catholics

comes mainly from a fight against *Kitsch* and also from psychological difficulties as regards the acceptance of abstract art.

Before examining representations of Christ by Indian artists let us keep in mind that there is a long history of depicting Christ. His image has always been shaped by the ethnic, cultural, philosophical and religious outlook of the peoples. It is very instructive, in this context, to study the religious paintings by Albrecht Durer (1471-1528). His religious paintings bear the clear stamp of his cultural background.

The difference in the presentation of Christian pictures, different according to peoples and times, is due to cultural, psychological and religious reasons. It is inherent in art that the object is represented through the medium of the artist's cultural background. About the psychological reason Martin Luther wrote, 'If it is no sin but good that I have a representation of Christ in my heart, why should it be a sin to have it in my eye?'<sup>5</sup> On the religious level, should the present-day artist not follow the early Christians when they, e.g., felt free to give a theological but not always historically correct interpretation of the childhood narratives of Christ? Could we introduce here the concept of 'cultural midrash'?

It is not only from a Christian cultural setting that an artist may draw his inspiration. If he lives in a predominantly non-Christian culture he will be inspired by this culture. Also artistic forms of non-Christian cultures have an opening for Christ, as God 'enlightens every man' (Jo. 1:9). In agreement with this a letter from Rome written in 1659 to the missionaries in the East says:

Do not attempt and do not under any pretext persuade the people to change their rites, their customs and their manners, unless they be openly opposed to religion and morality. . . not your ways but your faith must you bring, for what can be more absurd than to drag either France or Spain or Italy or any other country of Europe into, say, China.

The open attitude found a powerful reaffirmation in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. We have not always been so open-minded. Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya, one of the greatest Roman Catholic personalities of our modern period, was told to leave the Church building at Jabalpur as he wore a saffron robe.

Let us consider now the works of the main Roman Catholic artists in India and their contribution to the understanding of Christ.<sup>6</sup>

### *Angelo da Fonseca, Pune*

A. da Fonseca is a Goan by origin; he grew up at Pune, received his artistic formation at Bombay and at Shantiniketan. His teacher at Shantiniketan was Abanindranath Tagore. Art influences man

<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther, *WA* XVIII, 83.

<sup>6</sup> Protestant artists are not mentioned here, as Smt. Naomi Wray had a separate lecture on them.

in a total way. In order to understand works of art we have to understand also the motives which guided the artist's work. Da Fonseca's two main motivating forces were his desire to represent the *Catholicity* of the Church by clothing its teaching in Indian forms, and to offer his work in a gesture of *bhakti*.<sup>7</sup> He was deeply loyal to his Church, at the same time he had a broad ecumenical outlook and was radically open to non-Christians. For many years he worked in the peaceful and understanding atmosphere of the Anglican Khrista Prema Seva Ashram, Pune. As a pioneer he had to meet the main objections facing artists in India representing Christian themes.<sup>8</sup> He was told, any representation must be historically correct; it must be sweet and pleasing in its form; besides the question was asked, whether Indian forms were really worthy or able to represent such themes(!)

Christ is the central theme in 180 out of the 220 still available originals. E. L. King deplored that Christian painters through the ages followed too closely the Christian Creed by emphasizing that 'Christ was born from the virgin Mary, suffered, died and rose again', neglecting the rest of his life.<sup>9</sup> Also of da Fonseca's available pictures the largest number, forty-two, are about Christ's birth; the second largest number, nineteen, are about his passion and death.<sup>10</sup> When in the creed these two aspects were mentioned, importance was to be given to the historic dimension of Christ's life in opposition to gnostic tendencies. The same stress in da Fonseca's work and in the work of many other artists comes from different reasons. Christmas and Easter are popular feasts. The passion and death is the culmination of Christ's life showing in a special way his love. The nativity narrations restate the whole of the Christian message along with its historicity in the setting of a child, simple, attractive, full of feeling and devotion. In some of da Fonseca's Madonnas one can trace a meditative mood. 'Mary Meditating' is a typical Indian representation. One will recognize this when one compares a group of Indian paintings with a similar number of Western paintings.

The third largest group of paintings by da Fonseca are Eucharistic representations. In this he followed the Roman Catholic trend, so marked since the sixteenth century, to link the religious paintings with churches and liturgy. For Catholics the priest is the 'Minister of the Word' in its deepest sense when he proclaims Christ's life, death, resurrection and ascension in the celebration of Holy Eucharist. This was not, however, the basic idea of most of the Eucharistic presentations, but variations of another aspect: the Christian community renews the offering of itself to God in commemorating Christ's offering.

<sup>7</sup> A. da Fonseca, 'Indo-Christian Art in Painting and Statuary—A Historical Retrospect', in *Indica*, 1953, pp. 139-40.

<sup>8</sup> As an example of an unenlightened attitude towards Indian Christian art, cf. Fr. Konrad, *Art at the Service of Faith*.

<sup>9</sup> E. L. King, *The Art of Angelo da Fonseca*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>10</sup> When painting other aspects of Christ's life, A. da Fonseca gave priority to the following themes: Mercy (e.g. Mary Magdalene), Miracles (e.g. the marriage feast at Cana), the Message (e.g. the Sermon on the Mount).

A painter is also a prophet, one who is ahead of his time, showing the way into the future. An early painting of da Fonseca, 'Christ in the Upper Room' shows Christ at the last supper squatting on a *pāt*. Still ten years ago this picture impressed many as being exotic! Since the so-called 'Twelve Permissions for Catholic Liturgy in India' of 1969, this form of celebrating the Holy Eucharist, though never imposed on a congregation, has become fairly widely practised.

The fourth largest group of paintings are portraits of Christ, especially of the Sacred Heart and of the Good Shepherd. This shows that devotion, *bhakti*, was 'the substratum of his inspiration' as da Fonseca wrote, 'and that fostered by the breezes that descend from the lofty Himalayas.'<sup>11</sup> His whole life was also an effort to create his picture of Christ, a new type, both Indian and deeply Christian. The Indian features, the black beard and the black hair can be seen in all his works. Except in the fourth century, Christ has generally been depicted with a beard. In the earlier paintings by A. da Fonseca Christ wore a gown somehow similar to a simple cassock or a liturgical dress, even in one picture of the risen Christ. Later the artist preferred a simple kurta, which could have been worn by a leader in the market-place.

In the Hindu tradition the blue colour for the body or other external signs are familiar artistic forms to indicate divinity. Probably, in the reasoning of da Fonseca the use of these forms would diminish the forcefulness and directness of his representations.<sup>12</sup> There is no slavish imitation of *mudras*, no adding of paraphernalia in da Fonseca's pictures. They do not need them. Like other Roman Catholic artists, during all his years he struggled without reaching full success in creating a picture of the Sacred Heart, meant to make visible the love of Christ. He succeeded more in representing the Kingship of Christ. Some traditional forms of crowns could be adapted.

In shaping his portraits the artist had in mind the attitude of the people for whom they were meant. They use pictures because these representations should inspire them to devotion. Therefore representations more conducive to this are preferred: Sacred Heart, Christ on the cross, Christ carrying the cross, the Christ Child with Mary, the Holy Family, etc. Some did not like 'a certain dullness or stiffness' in his paintings. They never, however, would in any way regard him as not being able to depict in colours his deep enlightened faith.

Da Fonseca's Christian knowledge grew out of an unbroken Christian tradition. He was at home in the Old Testament. He fully grasped the meaning of symbols such as the Lamb. John the Baptist was one of his special friends. In painting his picture he could indulge in depicting his idea of an Indian ascetic. The Easter repre-

<sup>11</sup> A. da Fonseca, *Ibid.*, pp. 139-40.

<sup>12</sup> It was pointed out to me that A. da Fonseca showed a preference for blue saris for Mary. This naturally has nothing to do with the above mentioned blue colour indicating divinity. He rather followed in this the Western connection of a light blue colour with Mary, as can be seen for example in Lourdes statues and the membership ribbons used at times by members of the Community of Christian Living.



sentation he liked most shows the empty tomb. This indicates the depth of his insight. He meditated often on the book of Revelation. He could draw his inspiration from topics covering the whole field of Christian revelation.

Once going by bus with da Fonseca through the barren Maharashtra countryside, he remarked to me, 'This is the most beautiful scenery I can imagine'. He loved his land so much, especially Maharashtra and Goa. For him Christ could have walked through these lands and in his paintings he really does it. Da Fonseca creatively developed his artistic style right up to his unexpected death in 1969.

### *Angela Trindade, Bombay*

Angela Trindade is the daughter of the late Antonio Xavier Trindade, known as the 'Rembrandt of the East'. Though her father had 'kept to the conventions of Western academism'<sup>13</sup> she already during her earlier years expressed herself through Ajantha-style forms: refinement and realism, both spiritual and down to earth. Her heavenly hosts, all thoroughly Medieval Indian remind one of joyful Baroque angels.

Her style suddenly changed. She attributes this to a deep spiritual experience of the central position of the Holy Trinity for the Christian faith. Since then she uses triangular forms for her paintings. Whether painting Christ on the cross, the birth of Christ or a Madonna, she has kept up the use of these triangular forms. She calls her style jokingly 'Trinidadism'.

### *Sr. Genevieve, Bangalore*

Sr. Genevieve is French by birth. She is the most productive—considering the number of paintings—of all Christian artists in India. She is also the most appreciated, if the sale of pictures is a sign of appreciation. She is an Indian 'Sr. Hummel'. The very popular paintings and statues of this nun are even today produced in large numbers, in Europe, in America and especially also in Japan! Sr. Genevieve's people look very South Indian in posture and dress. They are the 'poor in spirit', the peace-lovers, the mild ones. Looking at them one realizes why the Sermon on the Mount is appreciated so much in India. Sr. Genevieve wishes to express in colours God's love revealed in Christ.

Besides the many paintings, mostly done during a few free hours in between her teaching work, she, during her holidays, paints larger scenes. They can be seen at Bangalore, Belgaum, Bombay, Rahata (Ahmednagar District) and Shevgaon (Ahmednagar District). The Belgaum pictures show the whole history of salvation beginning with Adam and Eve; they show a people on pilgrimage. Among them are the saints of the non-Christian religions of Karnataka, Goa and Maharashtra. The people of the 'advent' are led by John the Baptist.

<sup>13</sup> Jaya Appasamy, 'The Painters of the Tradition', in Jaya Appasamy (ed.), *Twenty-five years of Indian Art, Painting, Sculpture and Graphics in the Post-Independence Era*, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, 1972, p. 7.

The tabernacle with Christ's sacramental presence among his people is part of this ongoing move; the people of God with their saints are moving on, guided by the Spirit. The people of the New Testament are represented by Mary, adoring God. This one picture has 115 persons, several animals, etc. Similar paintings depict the passion and the resurrection of Christ.

Sr. Genevieve has carefully studied the meaning of Indian symbols. She does not want to use such symbols if they cannot be taken fully in their original meaning. She abhors any half-knowledge.

#### *Sr. Claire, Bangalore*

Sr. Claire, a Telugu, is just developing a style of her own. Like her '*guru*' (Sr. Genevieve) she paints in order to show the love and mercy of God. This love should become manifest through her artistic work.

#### *Jyoti Sahi, Bangalore*

Jyoti Sahi is a North Indian; he has settled at Bangalore. For him the understanding of symbols and traditional Indian forms is an ongoing process. As they have been reinterpreted from time to time, so, in his view, also a Christian can give his new interpretation. One of his mandalas shows 152 fish in the form of a triangle (*Śiva*), in a basket depicted by the shape of the moon (*Śakti*). The picture shows visually how the number 153 connotes fullness, representing a complete triangle, revealing in its number symbolism a Pythagorean influence.

Jyoti Sahi, a creative artist, brings into his pictures freshness of life (e.g. the womanliness of Mary in some of his Christmas scenes) and theological reflection (e.g. the coming down of the Creative World symbolized by descending hands and the acceptance by the virgin symbolized by ascending hands in a picture of the Annunciation).

Jyoti Sahi prepared a series of murals for the new All Saints Church, Shrinagar, rebuilt in 1968-70 after it had been burnt down in a riot in 1967. The murals are the only attempt of a Roman Catholic known to me of representing Christian themes in a modern Indian Muslim garb. The soldier piercing Jesus' side with a spear in 'The Crucifixion' wears a strange type of coat. The artist had to overpaint the original Muslim dress of the soldier, in order not to hurt Muslim feelings by giving the impression that a Muslim had pierced Christ's side!

#### *Sr. Theresa, Soso, Dt. Ranchi*

Sr. Theresa, a contemplative nun, has prepared some symbolic drawings. 'I took several days free, praying and meditating, before I prepared them', she wrote. Her designs, showing a cross with an oil-lamp, a host and a lotus, etc. are popular. Many prefer clearly Christian motives to those taken from other religions.

#### *Olympic C. Rodrigues, Bombay*

O. C. Rodrigues, besides other works, painted a recommendable series on the paradise.

*Joseph Pereira, Bombay*

J. Pereira much influenced by Renaissance masters, is more western than eastern. One of his best paintings is 'The Serpent of Bronze'.

*Desouza, Bombay*

In 1946 'Desouza, Raza, Bakre, Husain, Ara and Gade—six forward looking artists got together under the banner of the Progressive Group'.<sup>14</sup> 'Desouza is strangely un-Indian, choosing as subject matter social comment. Yet his work is representative of Indian art as artists discover creative identity in an understanding of their role in the Third World',<sup>15</sup> wrote Jyoti Sahi.

Some further Catholic Indian artists are *Everest Fernandes* (Bombay) *John G. Gonsalves* (Bombay), *Joachim Pastor* (Panjim), *Sr. V. Pereira* (Bombay), *Marie Pinto* (Bombay), *Julia Rodrigues* (Pune), *Sr. M. Silvestra* (Madras), and *W. Vandekerckhove* (Ranchi). All known Roman Catholic artists, excluding Jyoti Sahi and Sr. Claire, converts to Christianity, were born in families with a long Christian tradition.

In their effort to interpret Christ through Indian art, the Christian artists have to take upon themselves a task which is necessary and which among other people and cultures has been attempted through all the centuries of Christian history. The Christian artists in India has to master Indian forms and techniques. He has to develop his own style. His representations have to bear the stamp of his personality, his culture and his Faith. In the course of time certain Indian features will develop, as for example the meditative aspect and a certain meekness without weakness.

The interpretation of Christ through Indian art is as much our task as it is the task of the artists. We have to encourage our artists, we have to give them tasks to be done. I, for example, would like an artist to depict Mary joyfully singing 'My Soul magnifies the Lord', or the blessedness of the Sermon on the Mount or Christ's meditation 'Abba Father'.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, Introduction.

<sup>15</sup> Jyoti Sahi, *Lecture Notes*, Papal Athenaeum, Pune, 1972.