

Images of Jesus in Contemporary Art around the World

a lecture at Prague Christian Library
by Lee Magness
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Introduction

Let me share three introductory thoughts with you before we begin tonight's lecture and discussion about *Wise Men from the East*.

First, why are we looking at Jesus through the arts? My answer is, because art is like a window. A window can serve both as something we see other things through and something we see ourselves in—like a mirror. When we shine the light of inquiry from one direction we see objects refracted through the window—in this case we see Jesus more clearly, more compellingly. But when we shine the light from another direction we see ourselves reflected in the window—in this case we see ourselves not as we think we are or pretend to be but mediated through the pigments and patterns, the shapes and shades of the whole range of our understandings of who Jesus was and is. So art helps us see the world around us and helps us see who we are.

Second, why are we looking at Jesus through the art of Asians? We have much to learn from European artists. But looking exclusively at images of Jesus by western artists allows two fallacies to emerge. First, there is the historical fallacy—seeing Jesus so consistently through the same western eyes that we assume that that is how Jesus really looked. And worse, we may be tempted to think that if that is how Jesus looked then that is how he “was”—if Jesus shared our appearance, then he also shares our priorities and our politics and our presuppositions. Second, there is the theological fallacy—believing in or not believing in a Jesus who is the construction of a narrowly focused western theology, devoid of insights from other theologically astute people—African, South American, and native American, as well as middle eastern and far eastern. In other words Jesus looks like us, not like all of us put together, but like each of us in our own particularity.

Third, why do I entitle my presentation *Wise Men from the East*? The words come from the gospel description of the magi who visited Jesus in his infancy. I am reminded of these wise men from the east in several ways when I encounter great contemporary artists. First, like the wise men, many of these artists are eastern—from China, Japan, India, Iran. The first cultures to encounter Jesus were not European or American but were Babylonian or Persian or perhaps Indian. And in our own time wise and skilled people from the east are still making Jesus the object and subject of their artistic journeys. Second, like the wise men, these artists are drawn to Jesus. Whether or not they believed in him absolutely or understood him completely, the magi felt compelled to find him. The guiding light may have been external—a star—but the compelling force seems to have been internal. So in our own time artists from the east—some devout and others not—are still drawn to draw Jesus. Third, like the wise men, they leave something and they take something from their encounters. The magi brought their worship but left full of wonder; they gave their riches but they left enriched. So it is in our own time that artists from the east still give of the best of their talent and take away either faith or something akin to faith.

The Artists

Let me introduce you first, to He Qi, an internationally known Christian artist from China. He Qi experienced the pain of China's Cultural Revolution. He was sent to the country to do manual labor on a communal farm. Unable to perform heavy manual labor he was assigned to paint portraits of Chairman Mao. But he was moved in a way he had never experienced by the discovery on the creased page of an old magazine of a reproduction of a painting of the Madonna and Child by Raphael. This encounter was not only the foundation of his faith journey but also led to his ministry of religious art. From that time on he painted communist propaganda by day and Christian subjects by night. At the end of the Cultural Revolution he was able to study in Europe, eventually returning to serve as professor of art at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary.

Next we meet Sadao Watanabe (1913-1996). Because of the death of his father, this distinctive Japanese artist was apprenticed at the age of ten to a dyer of kimono cloth. When he became a Christian at seventeen he began adapting his technique to stenciling Biblical prints. He has produced hundreds of prints of Biblical scenes on hand made paper. Each one combines an ancient method of stencil dying with traditional Japanese art forms and Biblical content. Before beginning each design, Watanabe reads a Biblical passage repeatedly, prays through it, and only then turns to the artistic representation of the scene depicted.

Our third artist, Frank Wesley (1923 – 2002), comes from India. Wesley also made it his goal to express his Christian faith (as his name suggests, he was raised in the Methodist tradition) in the context of Indian religious iconography. Borrowing conventions from Hindu painting, setting his paintings in Indian landscapes, and employing Indian cultural commonplaces, Wesley has forged a meaningful vision of Jesus in an indigenous context.

Hossein Behzad (1894-1968), our fourth modern Christian artist, was a master of the Persian miniature. This Iranian painter learned to paint from his father, a famous designer of pen holders. When his father died he was apprenticed to a calligrapher and later studied under a famous miniaturist. Eventually Behzad struck out on his own, but his life entered a downward spiral of depression and dissipation. Eventually he was converted to Christ and began painting scenes from the Bible, notable the life of Jesus. A year of study in Paris led to a reinvigorated style which combined Persian and European artistic features.

Let me include one other artist who is not Asian but who should be very dear to your hearts—the Czech artist and poet, Bohuslav Reynek (1892-1971). Already well-regarded in the 1930s, Reynek, suffered the disfavor of the Nazi and Communist regimes from the late thirties into the sixties. Late in life he reemerged as an influential figure in the Czech artistic community. Reynek's only formal artistic instruction was a drawing class in a German secondary school; he had his first public art exhibition in Bohemia in 1929. Although his work may seem simple or even primitive, it is at the same time powerful and poignant.

The Artworks

As we turn to examples of compelling contemporary Christian art from around the world, we remind ourselves of typical European representations of scenes from the life of Jesus and then notice how our contemporary exemplars have adopted and adapted the conventional presentations.

The Annunciation.

Rogier van der Weyden's *The Annunciation* is a fairly typical Annunciation painting. Mary sits in her room, near an open window, at a reading desk, occupied with reading a book. An angel (sometimes with wings, sometimes not) appears, one hand raised in blessing, a sword-lily nearby. The sword-lily is symbolic of Mary's purity and of "a sword will pierce your soul" also. (At some point the lily also became a symbol of resurrection.) Mary turns demurely, tentatively, but attentively to the angel.

In Reynek's linocut *Annunciation* (Zvěstování) Mary kneels, praying, in an old house. The low table and the window on the back wall are conventional features of Annunciations. Behind the roof line of the house are trees reaching up into the sky. Reynek liked to draw trees—especially the thick black trunks and branches—not surprising given his rural background. Above Mary's haloed head are the wings of the angel of the annunciation or at least rays of light suggesting an angel. The most interesting aspect of the woodcut is the serpent climbing up the left side of the piece. This is Reynek's way of reminding us of Genesis 3.14-15. Listen for the reference to the serpent in this quotation from *Fish Scales*:

"It is a clear March morning. The sun rose an hour ago. The waters are still covered by a crust of ice, but this will melt before noon. Larks are singing above Nazareth, and Mary hears them, even though her window has been closed to preserve a crumb of sweet warmth from breakfast. In that moment the Archangel comes to her and conveys the Message, and Mary consents and obeys. For she is a humble girl and, at the same time, Wisdom itself. And at once Isaiah in Abraham's loins is singing in supreme exultation, "Lo, a Virgin shall conceive," like a fiery rooster at three o'clock in the morning, who flaps its wings, crows, and announces the rosy dawn, and then the entire household awakens with hope. And angels lower from the heavens a ladder made of the purest light, and on that ladder the Holy Trinity descends to Mary, who immediately becomes Heaven, the Vessel of God, Ark of the Covenant, House of Gold, and Tower of Ivory. And it's necessary that she be this big and heavy or else she would not be able to crush the head of the Serpent, so immense and hard, like a cliff full of caves, and with a maw that harbors the founts of all evil. Then, from that moment on, the Lord dwelled in Mary, and Mary dwelled in God, and a marvel so great occurred that we will never comprehend it. And evening follows the clear spring day. (from *Fish Scales*, p. 25)

Like most of He Qi's depictions of Christ's life, his *Annunciation* combines features from traditional European art and features from Chinese life and culture. A number of the features of the painting mimic traditional European conventions. Mary is seated in the room of a house, near an open window or door. She is busy with domestic work. The angel interrupts the work of the young woman and offers her the news. The angel of the annunciation carries a sword-lily. But the other details are all Chinese. Mary's clothing, hair, and embroidery work are quintessentially Chinese. Her embroidery pattern is storks or cranes. Notice the apron. The rice paper walls/windows/doors with their geometric designs are Chinese, as are the angel's robes. The lotus flower pattern is not only Chinese it is Buddhist. The angel holds the sword-lily to Mary, offering her a painful promise. The other hand gestures out the open door, calling this peasant to a whole new world of opportunity and experience. Mary glances up from her work, a needle held gracefully in her fingers, humble and ready to embark on a new divine enterprise.

Sadao Watanabe's *Annunciation* shows the winged angel, Gabriel, with the long nose of the stereotypical foreigner, feet firmly planted on the ground, bending toward a kneeling Mary. The left hand with its extended finger both gestures toward Mary and points to the dove, the presence of God's spirit which will "overshadow" Mary. The right hand reaches down to her outstretched hands. She, startled by the sudden apparition, has dropped her book and raises her head and hands reverently and expectantly. As in traditional European depictions, Mary has been reading, but she is kneeling on the ground not seated on a chair at a desk. The wooded hill winds and stretches across the horizon.

The Nativity/Visitation of the Shepherds.

Giotto's *Nativity* is fairly typical. Mary, golden-haloed and blue-robed, lying down after her exhausting delivery in the wood-frame and rock stable, lays her cruciform-haloed son in a manger with the help of a female friend. Ox and ass look on attentively, while Joseph, also haloed, dozes in the foreground. The shepherds in their holy homespun look at and listen to the angels above the stable. The sheep, including a ram and a lamb, seem oblivious to the entire scene.

Reynek's charcoal nativity, *Birth of the Lord III*, depicts the Holy Family fairly traditionally in typically (for Reynek) dark tones. Up and left appears to be the night sky with a star glowing dully over the whole scene. There is the suggestion of trees at the horizon on the left center. Animals stare out at us from the foreground. A shadowy cave or a gloomy lean-to loom from behind and around the family. The halos around the heads of the parents diffuse into the darkness and merge with each other. The baby's halo is defined with a line. Perhaps the most interesting feature is the baby's arms, extended to each side, reaching toward each parent, reaching out to us the viewers, but also stretched as it were on the cross already.

In Watanabe's *Nativity* the ever-present horse watches the tender scene of Mary placing the baby Jesus in the golden-strewn manger. The bearded and haloed figure standing in the back is probably Joseph; a blond figure kneeling on the left is assisting Mary. Grain hangs in bundles, drying on a ladder-like rack in the stable. Unlike the others, the halo of the baby is cruciform.

He Qi's version of *The Nativity* provides our first encounter with He Qi's brilliant blues. But it is what is not blue that next captures our eye—the pink of Mary's clothing, the yellow of hay and star, the angel's white, the apple's red. Oddly enough, Mary is usually the only blue object in western nativity scenes; here she is the most prominent non-blue. The green skin of the angel, the shepherds and Joseph suggest shadowed figures in comparison with the more spot-lighted flesh-tones of Mary and Jesus. The lines of the painting are stunning, especially for the way they group and regroup the figures in the painting. The large vertical ellipse encompasses the angel, the shepherds, Mary and Jesus, and three of the sheep. The horizontal ellipse includes the baby, the manger, and the sheep (the more narrow vertical ellipse eliminating the sheep). The central triangle formed by the intersection of the various lines draws the eye to the baby Jesus enfolded in his mother's arms. Other items of interest include Joseph, a marginalized figure but shedding lantern-light on the scene; Mary, wearing the same apron as in the *Annunciation*; the donkey and ox, typical animal onlookers at the Nativity; and the sheep, cavorting as if with joy at the feet of the stunned shepherds. Finally, the baby is holding a red apple, emblematic of the sin he came to bear in his body, but also the fruit he came to bear and the life he came to give.

In Watanabe's stencil, *The Angel and the Shepherds* a solid horizontal black line forms the foundation of the print; a vine winds up the lower left side. The isocephalic shepherds raise heads and hands in unison; six parallel sheep, three in the foreground, three in the background, accompany the shepherds. Then suddenly the upper part of the print springs to life with the bending angel and the black line bending to the bright star coiled over the recoiling shepherds. The lower static figures and the upper kinetic figure provide a real dynamism to the work. The outstretched arm and extended finger are reminiscent of the angel in the annunciation to Mary. Watanabe, ever attentive to cloth designs, has given distinctive clothing to each of the shepherds. Note the black sheep.

In Frank Wesley's *Mother and Child* Mary wears a traditional blue robe, but everything else about the scene is Indian. Mary herself is an Indian, sitting in an Indian courtyard, surrounded by a stucco wall, capped on one side by roofing tiles. A thatched roof on one side of the courtyard is supported by curving tree trunks and in turn supports a vine. Mary sits on a mat; nearby are a rope-and-frame bed, a planter and tree, and a brass container. The partially hidden head of Jesus, surrounded by a huge halo, peeks over the encircling arm of his mother. She in turn turns to eye us, looking in on this intimate scene. Does she wear a smile or a smirk? She holds a cup in her hand, ready to feed her infant.

The Adoration of the Magi.

Once again Giotto supplies a typical scene from the European tradition. The star, here depicted as a comet, blazes across the blue starry sky. Among attending angels, Mary and Joseph appear enthroned in the stable built against a mountain. Three magi, one kneeling, representing different ages and ethnicities, offer their gifts. Two (somewhat unrealistic) camels stand in the background with an attendant.

He Qi's artistic setting for his *Adoration of the Magi* is once again fairly conventional. Mary holds her son tenderly, the manger and the animals whose stall they occupy are nearby, the magi number three, some kneeling, some standing, all reverently bowing in the presence of the baby, their faces suggesting different ages and perhaps different ethnicities, and there are the gifts. But two features distinguish He Qi's depiction. First, the clothing is Chinese. Mary wears her colorful costume, including the same apron she wore in the Visitation of the Shepherds and the Annunciation. The magi also wear stylized Chinese clothes and footwear. Then there are the gifts. Two ceramic jars, one on the floor, one held by the standing mage, suggest the gifts of frankincense and myrrh. But gone is the gold. In its place is a distinctively Chinese vase beautifully and (in contrast to the generally abstract style) naturalistically rendered in a blue and white stork pattern (compare the embroidery design in the *Annunciation*). When we come to Jesus we bring him what we have. Jesus in the meantime still holds the apple. Artistically, the composition is once again as striking as the color. The bodies of Mary and child, the magi, and the animals form a rounded square with the head of the baby and the vase at the center. Their centrality is reinforced by the line coming from the lower right across the kneeling magi and pointing directly at the base of the vase and the head of the baby. One other interesting feature is the mage who is looking directly at the viewer, asking as it were what we will make of this scene and how we might respond.

The Adoration of the Magi is one of Watanabe's most frequently stenciled scenes. The magi, in perfect isocephalic alignment (this time vertically) and with identical gestures, offer their gifts and their adoration to the child and his mother. Each mage is distinct in hair, facial expression, clothing, and gift. There is no background; all the attention is on the people. Mary's figure and face dominates the scene. She stares her startled stare straight into the eyes

of the audience; in contrast the cruciform-haloed child gazes more warmly at the adoring magi. The white circles at the knees visually echo the breasts.

One of Behzad's first Biblical works, *Adoration of the Wise Men*, was painted for the Presbyterian Mission in Iran. The great miniaturist depicts the familiar scene with traditional Persian clothing, headdresses, and containers. Three camels tethered in the rocky terrain with its evergreen trees and flowering shrub, one bending to nibble some dry vegetation. The mother appears to be unwrapping her baby so the visitors can have a good look. The magi in their distinctive attire and headwear sit with the mother on a carpet of flowers. The gifts have been offered and set aside. All three magi gaze intently at the baby, the middle one with his hands crossed in astonished admiration.

The Flight to Egypt.

Giotto sets his *Flight to Egypt* under a blue sky and among sharp, tree-covered mountains. Mary, her face firmly fixed on the future, and Jesus with a cruciform halo ride the donkey with its one leg stepping forward. Joseph looks back even as he strides ahead. An angel hovers protectively overhead, while fellow travelers accompany the fleeing family.

In Reynek's version entitled *Escape to Egypt* the shadowy figures of the Holy Family trudge across the landscape on their way to Egypt. The scene appears traditional—Joseph leads the way, walking staff in hand; Mary and the baby ride astride the donkey, heads bowed in weariness; soft haloes hold back the gathering gloom about their heads. But the rest of the scene is unique. It is the rural landscape of Reynek's farm. The farm dog that followed him from chicken coop to cow stall now trails the family on their uncertain journey. Low shrubs grow on the hilly horizon. Weeds—are they briars?—reach up from the foreground. Two birds—are they birds of prey?—stand silent staring after the family. A faint moon hangs low in the grey sky. The world of the Holy Family, the world of Reynek, our world, have all merged into one world and this world is an uncertain place, an ambiguous place. It is familiar territory and it is the far country. It is Egypt—the land of safety and the land of slavery, the place where we escape the famine and the place where we experience the famine. It is home and not home, vaguely threatening and the only way through. Our head is bowed but our feet plod on. Home has become a dangerous place and we hope the dangerous place to which we go will become a home. It was the first journey of Jesus' life and it is our life journey.

He Qi's *Flight to Egypt* includes a number of conventions from renderings of the flight to Egypt—the mother and child ride a donkey, Joseph walks beside, leading his family to safety, the palm tree and pyramids signal their destination, and the moon suggests a flight by night. But the clothing, stylized as it is, reminds us that these people are Chinese. Other striking artistic features include the blocks of color and the triangular lines cutting through the family, reflecting as it were the triangular lines of the pyramids. The strong angularity is softened by the round moon, faces, breasts, apple, and swirls on the skirt. Note also how Joseph looks and points ahead, how the arm and stick form the suggestion of a cruciform shape, how Mary (and the donkey!) looks straight at the viewer, and how the traveling sack is made of the same material as the apron from previous paintings. Jesus still holds the apple.

Watanabe produced a number of versions of the *Flight to Egypt*. In one the fleeing family seems to lean forward, intent on prodding their donkey toward Egypt. Tree-covered mountains rise and fall prominently in the background, as if leaning with the sojourners. Mary clutches her child; Joseph carries a traveler's staff. They lean into an uncertain future.

In another print, Watanabe's most dynamic in the series of *Flights to Egypt*, all nature itself seems to be leaning toward their destination—rocks roll, trees bend, wind-swept leaves sweep toward safety. Mary, the only colorful feature on the print, also leans on as Joseph looks back—in concern for her and the child. The horse plods on, its geometric coat an interesting contrast to the swirling foliage. As Mary and Joseph look with consternation toward each other, the baby, nearly swallowed by the mother's encircling hands, peers out at us.

In our last example of a *Flight to Egypt* Frank Wesley offers us a most tender rendering of the event. He sets the scene on rolling grass-covered hills with one tree bending gently and a river meandering through the mountains. Mary and Joseph gaze fondly into each other's eyes, as Mary in her flowing blue sari hands a bowl to her husband. Joseph, not Mary, cradles with baby in his crossed legs. But for all its tenderness, this painting makes a theological statement: Jesus, sporting a large gold halo, is himself blue, the color denoting divinity in Indian religious artistic representation.

The Ministry of Jesus.

Duccio, *The Calling of the Fishermen/Disciples*

Sadao Watanabe, *Christ in the Wilderness*

In this very different depiction of Christ in the wilderness (of temptation?), lush leaves and bending bird and curving river surround the figure of Jesus leaning against a sturdy tree trunk and bending contemplatively, head on knee, hand reaching out to encounter the natural world. The bird with something in its beak suggests the raven that fed Elijah in the wilderness. If this is a temptation scene, it reminds us that temptation comes not only in barrenness but in the surfeit of nature's pleasures. It reminds us that there is a wilderness but there is also a wilderness of the soul.

Sadao Watanabe, *Throw the Net*

Luke 5 offers a unique look at the calling of the fisherman disciples. Jesus instructs the fishermen who have worked all night to put out again into the lake and let down their nets. A huge catch almost swamps the boat. The narrative not only highlights the miraculous powers of Jesus but also the potentially large "catch" for the disciples as they spread the good news about Jesus. In this depiction Jesus stands on the shore, while the two disciples are still standing in the boat. A red net falls limp in the right foreground. The circle full of fish suggests the great catch that has just recently occurred. Jesus holds hands with the disciples, suggesting that they have now joined him in his mission. Plant life and sea creatures thrive at Jesus' feet.

Sadao Watanabe, *Jesus and the Children*

More foliage and birds punctuate this depiction of the blessing of the children. Watanabe does not depict Jesus with his hand of blessing raised or holding the children on his lap or touching them on the head; instead he is holding hands with two of the children at his side. In this very geometric print the children occupy the four quadrants, although we picture them as side by side.

Hossein Behzad, *Go and Sin No More*

In this detail from the larger scene of the woman taken in adultery, Jesus and the woman sit placidly on the rocky ground. Elsewhere the men are beginning to drop their rocks and slink away. The woman is richly dressed and bejeweled, her arms drawn modestly across her chest, but her hair flows provocatively and uncovered down her back. Jesus, lightly haloed has

turned all his attention from the Pharisaic accusers and the self-righteous stoners and even from the woman herself to his drawing in the dirt. Most descriptions and depictions of this scene assume that Jesus was writing words, perhaps the sins of the accusers who one by one drop their stones when they see their sin in writing. Some suggest that Jesus was naming the woman's sins which he was about to warn her against and forgive. Still others think he was just doodling, giving everyone, including himself, time to think about the situation and the impending judgment. But Behzad has Jesus drawing a cross, the merest shadow of a cross, foreshadowing the means by which Jesus would not only forgive but propitiate or expiate or cancel her and all sin. A flowering plant, somewhat cross-shaped itself bends in the foreground.

He Qi, *Peace Be Still*

This piece is typical of He Qi's blue cubist style. It is both highly geometric and strikingly dynamic. In one scene the artist is able to tell the whole story in a kind of frozen but fluid narrative. The water in the foreground is roiling, suggesting the storm at sea which is the setting of this story. But the water in the distance is placid and the lowering sky offers the hope of light on the horizon. The human figures also lead us through the whole narrative. Two fishermen/disciples struggle at their oars, their eyes raised to the once threatening skies. The fisherman seated in the front—eyes closed and hands raised imploringly—is beseeching Jesus to rescue them from danger. One fisherman stands in the rear hanging tightly to a rope and the mast with its shadowy shred of a sail. Jesus stands with arms outstretched—cruciform—having stilled the storm. The dove with the olive branch reminds us of another stormy boat ride—Noah's—which also ended in safety. The olive branch is positioned almost as a laurel crown for the one who stands victorious over the forces of destruction, the prince of peace.

Frank Wesley, *Meeting the Rich Young Ruler*

Jesus and the rich young ruler had a lot in common: an interest in the law, in eternal life, in pleasing God. But Jesus saw the essence of the law not in the 10 Commandments but in the dual challenge to love God and love one another. So he called the wealthy and powerful young Jew to give his surplus to the poor and to follow Jesus. Wesley has brilliantly captured the interchange between these two young Jewish men and at the same time transfigured them into Indians. Their long dark hair is brushed back from their olive faces, Jesus (and probably the young man) wears the traditional Hindu mark on his forehead, they each wear a single earring. Jesus wears a simple linen robe draped over his shoulders, while the young man wears a richly embroidered blue garment. But most of all it is their eyes. Their narrowed eyes stare straight into each other, not condemningly, not critically, but connecting and challenging. It's not about the law, Jesus seems to say, or even eternal life, but about you and God, and you and the poor, and you and me. I know what you're doing, the man seems to retort, you are challenging my wealth and my authority. What follows this solemn moment of confrontation is the man turning away from Jesus, sorrowful.

Sadao Watanabe, *Peter Sinking*

This monochromatic print is in stark contrast the more or less polychromatic prints of Watanabe's repertoire. It also makes for a stark print, appropriate to the watery subject matter and focusing our attention on the black and white figures and on the event itself. Sea life and plant life frame the print. Three disciples in the boat look on with a mixture of entreaty and amazement. Peter's countenance is understandably terrified, almost despairing, as he leans toward Jesus and extends a long, curving arm. Jesus walks on water as we expect, and he reaches down to lift the faltering Peter. But his expression is as wide-eyed as Peter's. Is he reflecting Peter's fear, is he experiencing his own fear in the face of the near death of his

friend, or is he afraid of what this failure of faith portends for the future of his boldest disciple?

He Qi, *Mary and Martha*

The scene is domestic. A frame and rice paper window stands open on the left. A traditional Chinese boat-shaped roofline tops off the one room house. Fish and red peppers hang in the kitchen, ready to be added to the pot. A fire burns brightly in the white-stucco hearth, to which an image of an ancestor is attached. The scene is interesting, but the characters are key. Martha stands in the kitchen, head covered and matronly body draped in the crab colors of a working woman, basket in hand, apron (identical to the one Mary wore in Nativity paintings) around her waist. Her expression is some combination of rejection and resentment, disappointment and jealousy. Mary kneels at the feet of Jesus, her hands modestly and humbly crossed on her chest, her hair uncovered. She has dressed up for Jesus—the bright clothing, the earring, and the bright red flower. What do we make of her expression? Is it adoration, eyes closed in rapt attention to her Master? Or is it smug superiority, since Jesus himself has said that she has “chosen the better part”? Jesus looks neither at Mary or Martha, but at us, as he sits, one arm raised like an authoritative rabbi. Maybe we are to hear him saying, One thing is needful, or perhaps, Mary has chosen the better part. But maybe that arm raised to heaven is saying, I am the resurrection and the life.

Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Mantegna’s conventional *Agony in the Garden* shows Jesus with pancake halo and red sash, kneeling on a rocky outcropping on a terraced hill, praying with imploring hands to some cherubic angels carrying a cross. The scene is barren—bare rocks, bare trees, with one black bird perching like a portent on a bare branch. The city where he will meet his fate looms in the background and the party of betrayers and arresters emerge from its shadowy base. The three closest disciples lie strewn across the rock ground and each other, haloed by helpless. The figure on the right starts to stir.

Bohuslav Reynek, *On the Mount of Olives* (Olivetská hora)

Reynek offers us a traditional yet provocative view of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus kneels, bent over in agony. His hands appear to hold a cup, the cup he would have declined to drink but chose to drain to the dregs. A dark figure reaches out to Jesus, arms as if to embrace, one hand holding a bag heavy with coins. Other figures trail off to the right, ready to seize a drained Jesus. Back to the left, far from Jesus, lie the disciples hapless but still haloed under the straggly trees. On the right more barren trees scratch the clouded sky, its bright moon breaking forth through the gloom like his halo. Where are we in this winter orchard scene? Are we bathed in darkness, bent on seizing the bent one, money bag in one hand, sword in the other? Or are we the disciples, illuminated, haloed, but far from Jesus, unwilling to share his agony, his acceptance, his fear, his faith, unwilling to share his life, his death?

In He Qi’s, *In the Garden* Jesus’ face is in full light. The divine light—the light of revelation, of approval, of conviction—descends like a triangular spotlight on the praying figure of Jesus and the sleeping figures of the disciples. That triangle of light is reiterated by the triangular trees (leaf-like in the shadows, hardy, but hardly olive trees). Jesus’ face and eyes and hands are raised into the light. The attitude is both imploring and resigned. The disciples sleep, sleep soundly, kneeling or lying on cushions (or are they rocks?). The most striking features of this depiction are 1] the way the divine merges with the earthy to enfold the human (triangles), and 2] the way the bodies of the disciples are seemingly intertwined not only with

each other but with Jesus (in stark contrast to the usual depiction of the disciples at some distance).

The Last Supper

In Giotto's typical rendition of *The Last Supper* Jesus and his disciples sit in a stylized upper room. Jesus sits at the head of the table in his cruciform halo. The haloed disciples (black because of chemical changes in the gold pigment over the centuries) stare at one another as if to say, Is it I? Is it I? John the beloved disciple leans against Jesus who dips his right hand in the bowl with gold-robed Judas. Windows punctuate the rear wall.

Watanabe's *The Last Supper* shows Jesus, wearing a cruciform halo, gathers with his 12 disciples around a round table and lifts his hand in blessing or instruction. The table is spread with cups of wine and plates for bread and a large fish. Even though fish was not served at a Passover meal, the fish is an ancient symbol of the Last Supper, reminding viewers of the provision of loaves and fish at the feeding of the 5000, where Jesus said, I am the bread of life. That feeding foreshadowed the provision of his own body and blood at the Last Supper, signs of salvation. The fish also reminds us of the call to discipleship, to be fishers of people, faithfully following Jesus as he proclaimed the kingdom and called people into it. And the fish reminds of the early Christian symbol of Jesus as the fish (ichthus) (Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior). The symbol of the fish would have resonated with Watanabe and his Japanese audience—sea and sushi. The disciples look in all directions, reacting no doubt to Jesus prediction of a betrayer in their midst with Is it I? The beloved disciple reclines on Jesus, while Judas remains with his back toward us, staring still at Jesus.

In another of Watanabe's *Last Suppers*, one of his favorite subjects, a fully-bearded and haloed Jesus stares solemnly. Once again the disciples around the (this time) rectangular table look in amazement at Jesus, at each other, some staring into space, some with eyes closed against the harsh reality of his words (One of you will betray me) and the even harsher reality of their words (Is it I?). Once again the table is set with plates of bread, platters of fish, and bottles of wine—the distinctive bottles of Japanese rice wine called sake. Note Watanabe's flexible perspective—we are looking straight down on the plates but at the sides of the bottles. Judas is even more poignantly portrayed here, with the bulging money bag held tightly in one fist but hidden behind his back and with his other hand hiding his face in shame.

Reynek gives us a close-up of the *Last Supper* in his linocut "Miláček páně" (*The Lord's Darling*, that is, the beloved disciple). A haloed Jesus embraces his haloed "beloved disciple" with one arm and with the other holds out a piece of bread to feed his "darling". The child-like disciple with his head on Jesus' chest reaches toward the cup still sitting on the table. Another piece of bread sits ready on the table. The literal translation of the Czech title is endearing—the Lord's darling. There is also something gentle and endearing about the poses of the figures. This great moment of tenderness came in the midst of great pain for Jesus as he watched one disciple slip out into the darkness of his own soul and the others question the shadows that were creeping into theirs—"Is it I?" But for the moment a motherly Jesus feeds his darling.

The Flagellation.

In Reynek's *The Flagellation* we see an elongated Jesus—not the spiritually elongated Jesus of El Greco but a very tall, very human Jesus—standing as if on any modern city street. A windowed tenement building looms in the background. A shaded figure stands to the right holding some sort of scourge. Another figure reaches in from the left with a jar to catch the cascading blood of the bludgeoned Christ. Jesus himself, dressed only in loincloth and halo, bends his head in some mixture of resignation and pain and shame and sorrow and regret. But most striking are the swirling black lines of the scourge and the marks of the scourge in the air, on the ground, but especially on the body of Jesus. Reminiscent of the surfeit of bloody tracks covering the body of the Jesus of *The Passion of the Christ*, the lines cover Jesus from neck to foot belying the sad but placid face. This is a suffering savior. By his wounds we are healed, even though we have in a sense afflicted them. And he stands suffering in our workaday world. His blood is not only caught by us, it atones for us.

The Crucifixion.

Giotto's traditional *Crucifixion* shows Jesus nailed to a T-shaped cross with his sentence nailed above his head, a head which appears to have just fallen after those final words, It is finished. On the lower right, a figure prevents another wielding a knife from dividing Jesus' garment. At the lower left, the followers of Jesus mourn his passing: disciples support the swooning, blue-robed mother of Jesus, while Mary Magdalene, her wavy red hair unbound, kneels in grief at the foot of the cross. Angels fill the dark blue sky, also grieving, each in its own distinct way, over the death.

In the crucifixion scene which Reynek entitled *With Implements*, he features the cross-less Christ on the cross, looming over the two insurgents on their crosses, the two luminary spheres above, three skulls below, and Mary at the foot of the cross. Is Mary holding something in her hands or lifting her hands in entreaty? The title comes from the hammer and tongs strewn beneath the cross, the tools of the crucifiers careless tossed aside until time for the bodies to be removed from their perches. They form a perfect visual echo of the hammer and sickle, symbol of the communist government that oppressed Czechoslovakia and marginalized Reynek himself for so many decades. The forces that led to the death of Jesus—not only personal sin but also institutionalized oppression—are alive and well in our own day. Christ's crucifixion not only liberates us from those force, it stands in condemnation of them.

In another of Reynek's crucifixion scenes, *Calvary II*, Jesus, haloed head bent low, hangs on the cross between two insurgents. In the dark sky above the luminaries glow dully. Shadowy figures hold long poles toward each of the criminals. In a distinctively Reynek-like move, he has added a large farm wagon to the picture. Perhaps it is there to cart off the bodies of the offenders after they have expired or perhaps it is simply to remind the artist and his audience that the crucifixion took place in our own worlds.

In *Kristus*, yet another of Reynek's depictions of Christ on the cross, his disheveled hair, his dark sunken eyes, his gaping mouth have all been created with a mass of squiggling lines. The dark hatch-marked patches show the cross above his shoulders. Darkness surrounds his haloed head. But at the top, where we now expect Reynek to place a dark sun and a bloody moon, are a bunch of grapes on the left and a sprawling sheaf of wheat on the right. The eucharistic imagery is powerful and poignant as we think back and forth between the last supper and the crucifixion. The wheat appears to visually echo the disheveled, thorn-

crowned head of Christ, the bread of life. Listen to these comments on the head of the crucified Christ from Reynek's *Fool 2*

It's us sadness is swallowing,
of where we're going, unknowing;
bless my soul
You, Ancient Shepherd,
with gifts unexplored
of moon and sleep disturbed
with thorns upon your head,
your heavy head, hurt and hurt again,
just like a heart.

He Qi's *Crucifixion* is as conventional as it is innovative; more importantly, it is theologically astute. Jesus hangs on the cross, blood flowing from his five wounds (although the spear wound is normally on the right side). The God on whom he calls throughout the ordeal is represented as very present in the image of the descending dove. The slanted arms of the cross are unusual: do they and his arms form a V for victory? In the back left are the city where he was condemned and the two other crosses. We recognize two of the onlookers at the foot of the cross, but their appearance and the presence of the others are provocative. We recognize the two Marys. First, there is Mary, the mother of Jesus, standing beneath the cross just as the gospels say. But her head is pitched back in grief and she holds a baby, a gape-mouthed, limp-armed baby, a dead baby in her arms. The depiction is all the more powerful for the way it mimics the mother and child in Picasso's masterpiece, *Guernica*, the artist's testament to the suffering in the Spanish Civil War. Second there is Mary Magdalene, eyes closed, caressing Jesus, flamboyantly naked with protruding breasts and buttocks. Why the nakedness? Are we being reminded of her (non-biblical) identification as a sexually immoral woman? Are we being presented with the hackneyed suggestion of a romantic or even sexual relation with Jesus (as in *The DaVinci Code*)? Or are we being reminded that like Mary we all stand naked, spiritually vulnerable, at the foot of the cross?

And who are the other four? Conventional western crucifixions often included John the Baptist and John the Apostle (sometimes supporting Mary the mother). Is the man behind bars a reminder of the Baptist? Is the man in the hat the Apostle? I think not. I think they may represent some of those for whom Jesus died: the man collapsing on the left carries a cane, the one on the right is in prison, and the one below is either dead or downtrodden. Are these the lame he came to heal, the imprisoned he came to liberate, and the dead or downtrodden he came to raise or remove from oppression?

Sadao Watanabe's *Crucifixion* is a heavily stylized presentation, unusual for Watanabe. Gone are the people at the foot of the cross. The cross itself is stylized. Jesus appears beyond agony, in restful repose, gold halo intact, and some suggestion of a crown. Jesus is dead, but from the cross emanate rays of power and glory, reminding the viewers that God was glorified in his death, that Christ's victory is in his crucifixion.

The Resurrection.

In Piero della Francesca's traditional European rendition of the resurrection Jesus stands triumphant over death, holding the banner of victory. His triumphant pose, foot upon the empty tomb, is set against the background of the rocky, treed garden. The soldiers, sent to guard the tomb against the teacher's own disciples, lie in a stupor at the base of the tomb, also under the triumphant feet, as it were, of Jesus. The second guard from the left is a self-portrait

of the painter, giving the work of art not only a personal twist but an interesting theological angle. Although we see here the risen Lord, Christus Victor, the triumphant Jesus, our eyes are drawn to the evidences of his death—the red cross on the banner and the still oozing red wound in his side. The victory came at a cost.

In Hossein Behzad's, *The Risen Christ* Jesus makes the reality of his resurrection known to the women kneeling at the open tomb. A heavy stone across the doorway of the tomb, carved out of a rocky hill on which sits a city, has fallen flat to the ground. A haloed Jesus has evidently called to the women and now beckons with his hand. Is he offering it to hold hers, to lift her from her grief-stricken kneeling position, or to show her the wound in his palm? The woman in blue is still focused on the empty tomb, chin on hand, pondering what this unexpected emptiness portends. The other woman has turned at his word, looking full at Jesus, hands raised in surprise. The most interesting feature is the tree to which Jesus clings, especially the way the tree grows under his sash. Does he need the tree to lean on, has he lashed himself to it, as he recovers? Or is the tree a symbol of life?

He Qi's *Resurrection* is as heavily stylized as Watanabe's *Crucifixion*. In fact, even as the Watanabe print portrayed Christ on the cross in a glorious and triumphant way, so He Qi portrays the resurrection of Jesus cruciform with the bloody wounds still visible. In the four quadrants of the painting are 12 followers of Jesus clustered in groups of three. In the lower left are the three women who (in He Qi's earlier depiction) danced their way to the tomb, here with torch and pot. In the lower right are three fishermen disciples, one holding a net and looking up in the pose of the storm at sea, another with hand raised as in the calling of the fishermen. In the upper left are three more followers, one looking down at Jesus, one looking up with hands raised in wonder, and one looking and pointing up to God. In the upper right are two more blue-clad disciples with Judas, hand over his mouth and money bag clutched tight in his hand. Did Jesus die for Judas? Did he rise for Judas? In the lower foreground are the bread and the cup, further reminders that the resurrection of Jesus is tied historically and theologically to his death.

Conclusion

These “wise men from the East,” these Christian artists from Asia, plus the great Czech artist whose works we have been observing remind us of the power of the visual arts to “see Jesus.” They remind us that artists from other cultural contexts help us to see Jesus in fresh ways and to see what aspects of western art are more cultural than they are Christian. A keener awareness of the changing cultural contexts also helps us to focus more precisely on the core of the gospel message, on the story of Jesus, and on what we believe. It is our fond hope that the story of He Qi—a young Chinese communist whose world was forever changed by an encounter with a wrinkled print of a painting of Jesus—will be reduplicated around the world and throughout the years to come, when we introduce others to the paintings of the contemporary Christian artists among us.