

An Investigation into the Importance of «Inculturation» in the Image of Our Lady in Relation to Visual Arts in Religious Education according to Monica Liu

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to emphasize the importance of «inculturation» in the religious images drawn by Monica Liu (Ho-Pei), a unique artist who promoted Religious Art and Education in Taiwan. Monica Liu adopted Western Christianity into Chinese art to create paintings that reflect her love for nature as well as Our Lady who is deeply venerated in the Catholic Church and regarded as the mother of humanity. This paper is a qualitative research based on an interview conducted with Huang Wan-Yun, a protégée of Monica Liu who had a very close relationship with the latter during the last ten years of her life. This research is also based on some writings that Monica left behind and several articles written about her by acquaintances. The culture and faith expressed by Monica Liu through Our Lady's images help us to deeply understand the value and relationship between religious art and faith. In addressing the needs of the secular world, religious art has encountered difficulties in terms of contemporary aesthetics. Monica's distinct aesthetic considered «moral virtues» important to modern or contemporary art and their absence could result in distorted values. Therefore, true mission work in the field of religious art has to be close to everyone's heart, as well as emphasize the importance of inculturation through natural representations and create awareness of taboo in art, which involves «additional and supplementary» elements in original artworks.

Keywords: Monica Liu; inculturation; religious art; Our Lady.

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1. Introduction

Professor Monica Liu (also known as Liu He-Bei) is undoubtedly considered a great Catholic painter in Taiwan. She was born on June 17, 1928 in He-Bei, a

province of China in the North China region. Her family was originally from Shanxi province and her parents were educated in the United States. Her mother was a Nutrition and Geriatrics specialist while her father was the first author to write a book about «Soil sciences» in China. Both were well-known in China (Anonymous, 2017a, p. 15; Anonymous, 2017b, p. 120). After moving to Taiwan, Monica was baptized a Christian. During her early years in Taiwan, she learned to paint from traditional Chinese master Pu Xin-Yu. Following a period of hard training, Monica was able to effortlessly create soulful paintings of landscapes, figures, flowers, birds and animals. Later on, when the Apostolic Chancery's Cardinal Celso Costantini from Rome returned to Taiwan, through the introduction by bishop Lo Kuang, Costantini encouraged Monica to continue her artistic paintings on religious theme, and provided her a scholarship to study in Italy from 1954 to 1958 (Hoster, 2017, p. 10). Fr. Carbonneau (2016), his short clip briefs the history of Christian art in China which was promoted by Franciscans¹ in the 13th century and by Jesuits² who started their mission around the end of 16th century, using devotional images as gifts to teach the church's doctrine. In the 1920s, Costantini emphasized the value of Chinese art forms in promoting rich local traditions. Ticozzi (2008) mentioned that on October 17, 1956, Cardinal Costantini presided at an exhibition in Rome of religious paintings by Monica Liu to encourage her continued contribution in religious art, and he urged Monica several times during her study in Italy to write articles by interpreting her original style and meaning, which paved her way for «inculturation» in religious art (Liu, 2000, p. 72); this subject is discussed further in Chapter Two.

After completing her studies in Rome, Monica returned to Taiwan and taught at the Chinese Culture University and Educational Training Institute (currently the National Hsinchu University of Education). In 1974, she taught at the Art Institute of Chicago and held many exhibitions. In 1995, she went back to Taiwan and taught at Fu Jen Catholic University. She also conducted a workshop in Hsinchu. She had a passion for teaching and was loved by her students (Anonymous, 2017a, p. 15). Monica Liu died on the evening of the December 31st, 2016 in Hsinchu at the age of 88. Before that day, I had neither met nor heard of her, but I have seen many of her paintings all over Taiwan, and not only in Christian-related places but also in other cultural galleries and public museums. Her paintings are fascinating and very much different from other artworks. Her remarkable portrayal of characters or stories in the Bible using traditional Chinese painting, makes them extraordinarily unique. Thus, the artist behind those paintings intrigued me and the more I researched about her, the more value I found in her paintings. Painting as a skill was not a major concern to Monica, it was merely a solid basic training in preparation for becoming an artist. What is needed most is the conceptualization of a painting.

This paper is divided into four parts: the first chapter discusses the importance of religious art according to Monica Liu, as a way to spread the gospel; the second chapter discusses the importance of «inculturation» in religious paintings; the third

¹ The Franciscans also called The Order of Friars Minor or the Seraphic Order, is a mendicant Catholic religious order, founded in 1209 by Francis of Assisi.

² The Society of Jesus is a scholarly religious congregation of the Catholic Church, which originated in Spain in 16th century. The members are called Jesuits.

chapter presents Monica Liu's views and insights regarding religious paintings of Our Lady in particular; the conclusion interprets the difficulties that religious art has encountered in terms of modern or contemporary aesthetics, and the relationship between our secular world and beyond, which was also Monica's last wish with regard to the current state of visual arts in religious education in Taiwan.

Since I have no personal relationship with Monica Liu, this paper is simply a qualitative research based on an interview with her protégée Huang Wan-Yun (Figure 1, Huang, 2015), who had a very close relationship with Monica and had spent time with the latter during the last ten years of her life. This research also presents several articles and two books that Monica Liu wrote, as well as some articles about her written by friends and priests.

Figure 1. Monica Liu (right) with her protégée Huang Wan-Yun (left) and Huang's baby (middle). Huang explained that the mother holding the baby was the prototype for Monica's painting *Madonna as a bridge* (see Figure 6) Hsinchu, Taiwan. February 22, 2015. (Source: Photograph owned by Huang Wan-Yun)



2. What does religious art mean according to Monica Liu?

Based on an interview with Huang, Monica acquired her painting skills in creating images of Kwan-Yin³ and Our Lady from her teacher, traditional Chinese painting master Pu Xin-Yu» (Figure 2, Liu, 1993).

³ Kwan-Yin is the bodhisattva of compassion venerated by East Asian Buddhists, commonly known as the Goddess of Mercy (ReligionFacts, 2016).

Figure 2. *The White Dress Kwan-Yin.* (Source: Personal Collection by Huang Wan-Yun)



She became a pupil of master Pu when she came to Taiwan. For three grueling years of study, she worked days and nights non-stop just to develop the spirit and skills of traditional Chinese painting. She was praised for her hard work and was considered the best among her teacher's protégées (Anonymous, 2017, p. 15). Monica has dedicated her entire life using brushwork to show «natural and smooth writing» taught by her teacher. She tried to create an invisible God using a visible figure and based on the biblical words «Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father» (Jn 14:9, New International Version; Liu, 2014a, pp. 22-23). Huang also believed that Monica regarded religious art as a form of «non-verbal communication» or an «invisible God»⁴. However, representing religious art in terms of «secular» or material (i.e., «sacredness») aspects had always remained an issue (Huang, personal communication, October 19, 2017).

No one has ever seen God, so how can an artist paint an invisible God on canvas? According to Monica, the most important aspect can be found in the scripture: «No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known» (Jn 1:18, New International Version). Given that no one has ever seen God, Monica believed that an iconic art work hand-drawn using pen and ink on paper or silk with only the artist's eyes and heart to render God's holy face, literally presents the message: «a person who has seen Me has seen the Father». This artwork serves as the voice of men in the wilderness, as well as the «feet of those who bring good news» (Anonymous,

⁴ This term came from the title of an artistic commentary, a masterpiece published by Cardinal Costantini, in which he considered art creation as an «invisible God».

2017a, p. 15; Liu, 2014a, p. 23; Rm 10:15, New International Version). Monica Liu's protégée Huang also mentioned how Monica perceived the message: «No one has ever seen God, the one and only Son». According to Monica, our natural spirit creates images that come from the heart. Monica's close friend, Fr. Bosco Lu, SJ⁵ further explained:

What we need most is for human nature to be immersed in God. By the end of the century, we would still be confronted with issues such as purity, happiness, as well as internal and external crises that can only be overcome through a profound prayer life. Love cannot be measured by technology or love is not visible. Only divine love with a deeply held faith provides the positive aspects of human nature. This human nature is not something that average artists can understand. It is only artists whose life is «in closest relationship with the Father» and «His one and only Son» are capable of explaining the message to other people» (Lu, 2000, p. 6; 2017, p. 18).

In order to understand this divine relationship, it is important to consider both the sacred and secular aspects (i.e., colors and aesthetics) of religious art so as to create a connection between reality and beyond. Being a Buddhist, Huang believes that religion should not be «castles in the air» without concern for human needs. Religion should be better than «a hermit who lives in solitude»; it should provide comfort to people. However, contemporary aesthetic theories have led to a crisis in religious art, because many of them only reflect matters of the world, or respond to ephemeral needs.

In the interview, Huang named three artists whom Monica considered as true religious artists.

The first one is Rembrandt, a Dutch painter from the 17th century.

Rembrandt has a very good skill in dealing with light and shadow. He makes excessive use of black on the surface of his paintings to let viewers focus on the main subject. In his illustration of a room, he made use of different shades of black, presenting a delicate gradation of color that has depth or a three-dimensional sense. It gives a silent feeling, ideal for prayer and contemplation (Huang, personal communication, October 19, 2017).

Another vivid example provided by Monica was Giuseppe Castiglione, a Jesuit lay brother who came to China and became a court painter for an emperor famous for patronizing art. The paintings made by Lang Shining (his adopted Chinese name) are included in the National Palace Museum's collection of more than a million artifacts from the Ming and Qing dynasties.

Communication exchange between countries from the east and the west began in the 17th century, initiated by the Jesuits who came to China on a mission following the Franciscans⁶. Knowing the emperor's passion for painting, the Jesuits

⁵ SJ or S.J. (Society of Jesus) after a person's name means he is a Jesuit priest or brother.

⁶ The Franciscans came to China as missionaries around the year 1200.

asked Rome to send someone who was adept at the arts to earn the emperor's trust in order to protect the lives of their fellow Jesuit brothers, and it was Giuseppe Castiglione who was chosen. Castiglione followed the style of Caravaggio (Italy), which is characterized by illumination (i.e., spotlight) focused on the most important subject of the painting so as to attract attention, while the rest of the elements are rendered with a dark background. To satisfy and comply with the emperor's request, Castiglione totally changed his style while in China and painted exotic animals, rocks, flowers, landscapes, and horses without applying the Caravaggio technique. According to Monica, artists generally treat their artistic style as their life; they would rather die than conform to other people's instructions. But Castiglione never complained or demonstrated defiance» (Liu, 2000, p. 63). He may have found a new avenue in Chinese painting and remained optimistic about it. Monica recalled the Castiglione exhibition held at the National Palace Museum, wherein the paintings were extremely appreciated by Chinese people. Castiglione's contribution was not only the combination of western and eastern art elements, but also the creation of an innovative style that preserved the artist's Italian painting technique that the Chinese people recognized. Monica believed that Chinese and Western art are very difficult or impossible to merge, but Castiglione was a prolific artist who was able to combine both art forms.

The third artist is Fra Angelico, also called *il Beato Angelico* (1395-1455) or in modern Italian language means the *Blessed Angelic One*. In 1982, St. Pope John Paul II declared Fra Angelico's beatification in recognition of the latter's life of holiness, thereby making the title of «Blessed» official; the common English name of Fra Angelico means the «Angelic friar». In the book *The Smiling Face*, Monica cited the paintings of Angelico, which reflected the painter's optimism, purity, and childlike innocence. But these did not mean that Angelico never suffered, he also had a life of penance as an artist. In his painting *The Annunciation*, humanity is portrayed as having completely touched the light of heaven, while in his painting *Crucified Christ*, the «perfect combination of heaven and earth» is depicted as free of sadness and worldly ideals, characterized by the inner workings of the soul which is filled naturally with spirituality and holy love (Liu, 2000, p. 47). Monica believed that Angelico was the only artist in closest relationship with the Father (Huang, personal communication, October 19, 2017).

Monica Liu spent her entire life studying and improving her craft, while enriching her soul through prayer and understanding of the Holy Trinity. She was filled with joy by connecting herself to life beyond this world. Fr. Lu explained:

She gradually immersed herself in God, letting God hold her hand and brush, while inspiring her to create those paintings one by one. Regardless if they were appreciated or not, those painting were very precious. The great Renaissance painter Angelico left an immortal legacy to future generations. His reflections penetrate all the way into the heart of the subjects he portrayed, and the same goes for professor Monica Liu (Liu, 2000, p. 6; Lu, 2017, p. 18).

Monica believed that her greatest accomplishment in life was to focus on religious art, which made her spend most of her time reading, writing and painting (Huang, personal communication, October 19, 2017).

3. Why is «inculturation» important in religious art?

During one of his homilies, a Jesuit priest talked about Jesus' appearance. He said that Jesus was not as good looking as those portrayed in western paintings, and probably looked very ordinary, oriental⁷ and even a little bit bald, which is exactly the opposite of how we imagine Jesus. But what did Jesus really look like? Is this important to believers? The truth is, «it is». Not all believers have been out of the country or have seen a foreigner with blue eyes and blonde hair. So, how does one feel towards a western-looking Jesus, depicted in a portrait? All of us have someone to admire, a model we want to emulate. If the image of Jesus is even slightly similar to a model we admire, then we would have a connection with that image because of its local form and approach. This approach to «local culture» is called «inculturation». When we talk about «inculturation», we need to first understand its definition and differentiate the terms «localization» and «inculturation». According to Sergio Ticozzi (2008):

Localization refers to the process of making a Church truly local, with its basic structures and institutions, run mainly by local personnel in a rather autonomous way, able to take initiatives to meet the needs of the local community, both Catholic and non-Catholic.

Inculturation is the double process of the Christian faith taking roots into a local culture and being expressed in local forms and ways, while the values of this local culture enter into the Catholic faith to enrich it. In the words of St. Pope John Paul II, it is «the incarnation of the Gospel in the hereditary cultures and, at the same time, the introduction of these cultures into the life of the Church». Simply put, it is the rooting and the integration of the Christian faith in a given culture.

Cardinal Costantini was a great pioneer of inculturation given his artistic talent and expertise in the fields of sculpture and architecture. He was a trained artist and had very good theoretical and practical artistic experience. When he became the Chancellor of the Apostolic Chancery in China, Cardinal Costantini was deeply aware of the importance of art in determining human response to Christian faith. One year after his arrival in China, he immediately implemented a policy of using art in missionary activities. He also encouraged and supported Chinese Christian artists to travel to Europe for further studies, and Monica was one of these beneficiaries. In 1923, he wrote a letter and specified several points related to mission and evangelization:

⁷ From an ancient or biblical perspective, Jewish people are also considered oriental; Israeli culture is also a kind of oriental culture (Liu, 2000, p. 11).

1. It is wrong to apply Western art in China.
2. Keeping foreign art styles will definitely create prejudice against the Catholic Church, which would also be regarded as foreign.
3. Throughout history, it has been the tradition of the Church to support the art and culture of diverse groups by adopting and adapting local art forms.
4. It is possible to adopt Chinese art, as well as produce great and beautiful results (Ticozzi, 2008).

Cardinal Costantini once told Monica that when missionaries came to China, they led a very simple life. Since the Church wanted to settle in China, the missionaries should have tried to improve their living environment. Unfortunately, the person in charge then had no interest in art; hence, most church architecture had a western or copied temple design. In the end, the churches did not appear westernized and some of them even looked like temples. Because of this, the cardinal expressed his disappointment, «How dare we show our love to the Lord in front of the Chinese people? Love is beauty and it is the most primitive form of beauty. God's love cannot be copied; God's word gives life to the listener. There is no word if "His church" fails to cultivate the arts» (Liu, 2003, p. 4).

I believe that Monica was strongly influenced by Cardinal Costantini because she had a high regard for her teacher. But what made her consider «inculturation» as an extremely important aspect in both Christian art and traditional Chinese art? When Monica visited the Msgr. Lo Kuang⁸ in Italy in October of 1954; she was surprised to find a beautiful housekeeper opening the door. The housekeeper reminded her of the image of Our Lady painted by Michelangelo or Raphael. Similarly, while living in Belgium, she also noticed that the women there reminded her of the image of Our Lady created by Dutch painters, and blonde French girls with blue eyes had exactly the same appearance as Our Lady, as portrayed by French painters. Monica eventually realized that the housekeeper resembled an Italian Madonna, and it dawned on her that «Each region should have a local statue of Our Lady. The image should be close to the hearts of Asians and should not be foreign-looking» (Liu, 2000, p. 10).

In the New Testament, Paul talks about freedom:

To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings (1Co 9:20-23, New International Version).

⁸ At that time he was a Monsignor, and from 1961 to 1966 he served as bishop of Tainan in Taiwan, then in 1978 he was appointed archbishop of Taipei and the principal of Fu Jen Catholic University in Taiwan.

In this paragraph, Paul points out the true meaning of evangelization, which is becoming a man for others yet not losing oneself, but to create a win-win situation in which one wins for himself and wins for other people. For Christians, they were born to unite for the sake of the Gospel, i.e., to help bring all people together and unite with God. It is clear to us that this unity has only one name: Jesus. For us, being one meant being with Jesus. This message echoes back to what Monica said regarding our natural spirit, which creates the image from our hearts: «in closest relationship with the Father» and «the one and only Son».

Monica finally understood that the Italian housekeeper who reminded her of Our Lady was influenced by her perception of Italian women. Hence, she realized that it is important for every region to have its own image of Our Lady. For this reason, Monica proposed the idea of having a Chinese-style image of Our Lady. Another artist whom Monica considered a very good example of «inculturation» was Castiglione, because he did not forego his Italian painting technique but instead, combined everything he knew and created an innovative style that enchanted the people and enriched traditional Chinese heritage. According to Huang, Monica also saw the same quality from her teacher:

My teacher's images of Our Lady and Kwan-Yin were influenced by the master of Traditional Chinese painting Pu Xin-Yu. These were combined with what I learned from art school in Rome, enabling me to create a new painting style, which portrays Our Lady using traditional Chinese painting. Moreover, the image of Our Lady embodies the Chinese people (Huang, personal communication, October 19, 2017).

Monica also mentioned in the introduction of *The Smiling Face* that the book was written to promote inculturation:

The church's inculturation began with an honest dialogue between the church and China regarding local culture. The conversation exchange involved five thousand years of culture, inherited separately from both the church and China. This dialogue between the church and China would be relevant to the 21st century. If both parties clearly understood their position and vision, and were willing to accept each other's differences, then any dispute or unrealistic approach to inculturation could be avoided, paving the way for a positive, natural and solid inculturation. This kind of dialogue benefited both parties without making any sacrifices, thus creating a mutual relationship based on trust (Liu, 2000, p. 11; 2017, p. 18).

4. «Inculturation» in the Image of Our Lady

Our Lady's image as a «mother» and «Our Lady» is based on two aspects: 1. tolerance – she is the mother of all human beings; 2. mediation – she is the intercessor who helps us pray to God. According to Huang's thesis (2010, p. 1), Our Lady is regarded and honored as the true Mother of God and the mother of

redeemer (Christ). In fact, this has been written as early as the 1st century in the New Testament. The Gospels of Matthew, Luke and John have shown the importance of Our Lady in the history of salvation, as well as her «virginal conception» and image as the mother of all human beings. Being a Buddhist, Huang (personal communication, October 19, 2017) believes that Kwan-Yin in Buddhism is as important as Our Lady in the Catholic Church. Kwan-Yin listens to the people and saves them from suffering while Our Lady does the same in response to her children's plea. Only a mother is probably capable of living not just for herself but also for others.

In the 4th century, as part of the Credo, Our Lady's virginal conception was deeply revered even more than the other saints. By the 12th century, the salvation of Our Lady was highly emphasized, with the «Hail Mary (Ave Maria)»⁹, «Our Father (Pater Noster)»¹⁰, and «the Credo»¹¹ deemed as important prayers. At that time, Our Lady became a source of inspiration for the creation of literature, sculpture and plays, because she is the mother of Jesus – the mother of God. Even though Jesus Christ is the way to God, Our Lady is regarded as the mother of all believers. Seeing Our Lady's loving and perfect face draws the faithful to call on her for intercession and prayers. Fr. Aloysius B. Chang¹², SJ once said: «God is Almighty and beyond our reach, so we mortals need an intercessor to pray for us. The Virgin Mary is the mother of God, the mother of Christ, and a kind lady. She is the best mediator between God and humanity. Asking for her intercession could also be more effective than praying directly to God». (Huang, 2010, p. 18) This belief was held strongly and continues until today.

In addition, Fr. Lu said that he was really impressed by Monica's image of Our Lady. At that time (1950s and 60s), it was an era of war and migration. People felt homesick, anxious and fearful. The beautiful and elegant image of Our Lady by Monica Liu helped console everyone, giving people a feeling of belongingness. Monica's art works had healing power; her paintings constantly touched people and gave hope, so everyone could survive (Gutheinz, 2017, p. 15; Lu, 2000, p. 6). According to Huang (2010, p. 1), with the turbulent situation brought by wars in the 12th century, an artwork depicting the last judgment wherein the virtuous are rewarded while the wicked are punished, could not offer comfort to people. But Our Lady's «ideal» and «pure» image resonated with the people. Thus, artists portrayed a «smiling» and «compassionate» image of Our Lady, who is regarded as the mother of all believers even until today.

Monica's devotion to God and to Our Lady was evident, as demonstrated by her passion for art education. Some of Monica's paintings of Our Lady were sold to Cardinal Costantini. In 2000, Monica donated one of her paintings – the *Madonna's*

⁹ The «Hail Mary» is the most familiar prayer used by the universal church in honor of our Blessed Lady (Thurston, 1910).

¹⁰ The Lord's Prayer: The first two words of the «Our Father» in Latin came from Jesus (Fu Jen Theological Publication Association, 2005, p. 777; Lk 11:2-4; Mt 6:9-15).

¹¹ Credo means «Creed» or «Belief». The word «Credo» comes originally from the Latin «I believe» (Congregation of the Disciples of the Lord, 2001).

¹² Fr. Aloysius Chang, S. J. (1929-2015), he was the dean of Fu Jen Faculty of Theology of St. Robert Bellarmine and a famous Chinese theologian who dedicated his life on the concept of inculturation in Christianity.

Tender Embrace of the Child Jesus (Figure 3, Liu, 2000) to Fr. Gutheinz as a gift and wrote an acrostic poem with the priest's Chinese missionary name on it.

Figure 3. *Madonna's Tender Embrace of the Child Jesus*. Photograph was taken by the author. (Source: Personal Collection by Fr. Gutheinz, SJ)



Every Christmas, she contributed generously by drawing Christmas cards for the Church (Figure 4, Liu, 2016).

Figure 4. *Making music and songs between heaven and earth*, Christmas card draw by Monica Liu. [Source: Fu Jen Faculty of Theology of St. Robert Bellarmine (archives room)]



One Christmas, Monica created a painting called *The Mysterious Conversation* (Figure 5, Liu, 2010),

Figure 5. *The Mysterious Conversation.* (Source: Aurora Catholic Association)



Along with an explanation:

There is a mystery behind the verse, «The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us» (Jn 1:14, New International Version), but Our Lady brought out the truth because she heard and understood completely. This was her relationship with God. She obeyed unconditionally to fulfill God's will! I like the phrase «without distance»; the relationship between Our Lady and the child Jesus is also like that. There is no distance between them so anything could be accomplished (Yi, 2017, p. 24).

«The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us»; the Virgin Mary's mission was to bring her Son Jesus Christ to the world and lead the world to Christianity. The Council of Ephesus decreed in 431 that Mary is *Theotokos* (mother of God) since her son Jesus is both God and man with a double nature. The Virgin Mary was given the title «Blessed Mother», because she is the mother of Jesus who is both divine and human (i.e., the word became flesh). This is also why Monica believed that the Virgin Mary enabled the word to become the truth.

Monica also found this explanation confusing until 1998 when she joined a Bible study in her parish and finally understood Our Lady's divine grace. The priest presented a slide of a Palestinian woman standing by a well with her five-year-old

child. Both of them were poor and had their feet exposed, yet they looked emotionally stable. Monica was astonished by the priest's interpretation of the image, but she finally understood the meaning of «Our Lady» and discovered that learning about the Bible and the Holy Land is also important to people in the field of religious art. Elements like Our Lady's appearance and true spirit should be analyzed as well (Liu, 2000, pp. 10-11). This was the process that Monica went through in turning her passion and spiritual formation towards devotion to Our Lady.

During the funeral mass for Monica, Fr. Louis Gendron, SJ, who has known Monica for many years, talked about this in his homily:

Jesus is a Jew, as well as his mother, his family, and disciples. But under sister Monica's brush and portrayed in many of her fascinating and beautiful paintings, Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and Joseph all look Chinese. They don't look Jewish at all! Why is that? There is actually a very deep and important explanation. It is because Jesus resurrected and after that, His body was no longer human like before. After the resurrection, Jesus became one with the people. Therefore, it is absolutely fine to draw Jesus as Chinese to help the Chinese people feel closer to Him. «Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father» (Gendron, 2017, p. 18).

He also added that after Jesus' resurrection, the Virgin Mary was also taken up into heaven¹³. So, Our Lady also shared Jesus' resurrection and became Chinese as well. Our faith has always affirmed the truth, «The Word became flesh» (Gendron, 2017, p. 18).

As a young lady, Monica spent time learning traditional Chinese painting. After completing her studies in Europe, she began creating new and innovative art works that focused on Chinese people. This increased her awareness of the rich Chinese culture which along with the verse, «The Word became flesh» served as the theme for her paintings, penetrating the deepest part of the human heart, especially those of the Chinese, the faithful, and atheists. The artwork was a way to reveal God's blessing and love for us («Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father»), as well as the gentle care of Our Lady, as declared in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, No.62 (Paul VI, 1964): «By her maternal charity, she cares for the brethren of her Son, who still journey on earth surrounded by dangers and cults, until they are led into the happiness of their true home» (Huang, 2010, p. 5).

5. Conclusion

In general, I agree that religious art needs the element of «secularization», but it does not have to be totally secularized. Religious art cannot be completely separated from reality. It is also dependent on our history, culture and modern aesthetics. If not,

¹³ Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary: Pope Pius XII proclaimed on November 1st, 1950 in his Encyclical *Munificentissimus Deus* the dogma of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The dogma states that, «Mary, Immaculate Mother of God ever Virgin, after finishing the course of her life on earth, was taken up in body and soul to heavenly glory». The festival is scheduled on August 15th (Congregation of the Disciples of the Lord, 2001; Pius XII, 1950).

religious art would be merely, as Huang said, «castles in the air», which nobody understands and appreciates. When religious art could serve as a medium to spread joy or to console a suffering human heart, then it should definitely address people's needs. However, we also have to treat religious art as a precious tradition that is not limited to a demonstration of one personal artistic style; it should also have a greater purpose of spreading the gospel¹⁴ (Huang, 2010, p. 21). Otherwise, it is merely regarded as plastic art instead of religious art. This echoes what Huang said (Huang, 2010, p. 28; personal communication, October 19, 2017): religious art portrays an «invisible god» visually. Secularly speaking, religious artists should contribute to society.

In December 2007, Monica had a chance to meet Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI and offered one of her paintings *Madonna as a bridge* (figure 6, Liu, 2007). She explained to Pope Benedict XVI that St. Pope John Paul II asked the Church in Taiwan to serve as «the bridge Church» because he was hoping that the Catholic Church in China would unite with the universal Church as soon as possible (Tou, 2017, p. 24). If we were to achieve this great mission, first of all, given that there is only one percent of Catholics in Taiwan, religious art must serve as the bridge between religion and secular life. Religious art in Taiwan still has a lot to improve and develop to achieve this purpose. Huang (personal communication, October 19, 2017) considered that we also need Our Lady to serve as a bridge or intercessor between God and humanity.

Figure 6. *Madonna as a bridge*, 60x91cm. (Source: Congregation of the Disciples of the Lord)



¹⁴ Declared by Cardinal Costantini (Liu, 2003, p. 33).

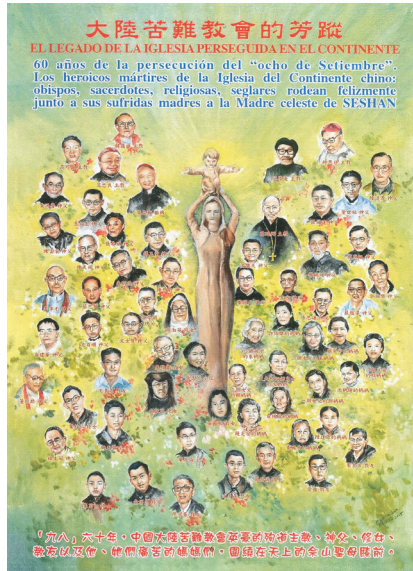
Monica also believed that religious art should be rendered by people of faith, because art is influenced by faith and artistic creations reflect the needs of the people. When human beings suffer, their most important strength is faith (Huang, personal communication, October 19, 2017). An extremely touching example is Monica's portrait of *121 Martyr Saints of China* (Figure 7, Liu, 2013b).

Figure 7. *121 Martyr Saints of China.* (Source: Catholic Window Press)



The 121 saints include 6 bishops, 24 clergies, 8 friars (religious brothers), 7 nuns, 9 women who took the vows of chastity, 16 virtuous women, 36 lay people, 2 saints who were violently killed, and 13 teenagers. Huang (personal communication, October 19, 2017) said that Monica meticulously researched and used photographs as reference, in order to do justice to these Chinese martyr saints. Monica placed Our Lady in the middle of the painting as a source of comfort. Later on, she created a *New Martyr Saints of China* (Figure 8, Liu, 2015), which portrayed those who suffered greatly in prison and labor camps, as well as those who sacrificed their lives and were persecuted by the Chinese communist government since 1955.

Figure 8. *New Martyr Saints of China.* (Source: Personal Collection by Fr. Matteo Chu, SJ)



In this portrait, Monica placed Our Lady of Sheshan¹⁵ in the middle of the painting to represent hope. The portrait of the martyr saints has pushed religious art to another realm, which was the total inculturation in China. The artwork depicts the hardship of people who suffered for their faith. Each portrait presents a story of sacrifice, which has inspired people in times of great difficulties, such as facing life's daily challenges and experiencing suffering due to health, family, career, or emotional problems. But despite all these, Our Lady would always be there to watch over us.

The most important purpose of religious art is the expression of the soul; not the soul of the artist, but the spirit of God. A good example of a religious work of art is an icon, which helps people focus on prayer and meditation. Artists should be aware that fame is worthless and that they should be willing to be used by God for His own purpose. Like her teacher Monica, Huang (2010, p. 28) was in a dilemma of how to express sacred content using secular materials. This has always been one of the problems that faced religious artists. In response to the needs of the secular world, religious art has encountered difficulties in terms of modern or contemporary aesthetics. A critical thinker, Monica once talked about German Expressionism and criticized Edvard Munch's painting *The Scream* in her article *Nature and Supplement* (Liu, 2014b):

¹⁵ In the 16th century, the Jesuits purchased a property on the south side of the Sheshan mountain located in the Songjiang district of western Shanghai, and built a church devoted to Our Lady. Our Lady of Sheshan is sometimes called Our Lady of Luck, because the statue resembled the Chinese character for «luck» (Archdiocese of Washington, 2018).

Standing on a twisted bridge is a person with a twisted face that appears to be screaming. A viewer's heart could feel such horrific scream that disrupts the peace and quiet, making the whole world distorted (Kung, 2017, p. 20).

Unlike Munch's disturbing, exaggerated, morbid, and grim sense of beauty, which troubles the spirit, Monica believed that beauty should express serenity and simplicity, as exemplified by French expressionists in their interpretation of nature during the nineteenth century. She also cited Picasso as an example, who as an artist locked himself in a small room for five years to finish the painting *The Young Ladies of Avignon*, which made him famous in the western art world. However, Picasso didn't easily find his motivation but relied on «sex» and «drugs» to achieve his goal (Liu, 2013a, p. 13). With this painting, he shook up the world and used painting as a weapon against tradition, morality, nature, humanity, and God who created everything (Cheng, 2002, p.151).

I believe that Monica had no intention to discredit the achievements of either Munch or Picasso simply because they live in a different world of art. Chiang Hsun (1998, p. 40), a very famous Taiwanese critic once said:

In our culture especially in the field of art, there is a tendency to be physically detached for a long time. We become unfamiliar with the human body's original desires and even feel a sense of rejection.

I also agree with Monica's views on Cardinal Costantini's «train» metaphor: «Everyone is longing for new things, new creations, and everything new! ...Such as in a railway system, people are interested in new creation, new train carriage or locomotive, but it should always follow its track, train's departure motivated by art, and the tracks symbolize "tradition" while every destination of different train routes represent creation» (Liu, 2003, p. 47).

For a time (started on January 18, 1969), Fr. Gutheinz worked with Monica in editing Christian theological terminologies. He saw that Monica had a very deep faith and spiritual relationship with Our Lady, which became her foremost inspiration in life, along with Christian teachings that influenced her behavior as a traditional eastern Christian lady. Monica was totally immersed in her Christian faith and expressed this and her gratitude through art. She was very different from modern artists who had strong creative expression. Her inspirations came from God and she expressed these through figurative images. Monica believed that God is the best craftsman who created the universe and human artists like herself cannot «add or supplement» this creation. She considers «addition and supplement» are both taboos in her artworks, citing Auguste Rodin's sculpture *Monument to Balzac* as an example for its simplicity and sincerity. She appreciated Rodin's candid and honest rendition of Balzac's disheveled hair and round body covered by a robe (Kung, 2017, p. 20). Her extensive years of practice and knowledge about art were on par with her teacher Pu, who believed that «beauty exists in simplicity and inner peace». Fr. Gutheinz also mentioned that every talented artist naturally has his or her own world. He believed that Monica wasn't critical of modern art, but simply wanted to express a different opinion from other modern artists. However, these artists still

have something in common. For example, Picasso's *Guernica* shows the artist's compassion towards victims of war and violence, while Monica's *121 Martyr Saints of China* and *New Martyr Saints of China*, exemplifies compassion and care toward the sacrifices of the faithful and religious. Monica's distinct aesthetic considers «moral virtues» important to modern art and their absence could result in distorted values that are focused on pleasing the public in order to gain fame and fortune or self-adulation and superficial progress, which artists should learn to give up.

Besides that, it was true that several publishers rejected Monica's paintings because they found them too «traditional». Monica asserted that the culture of art should be promoted with the same spirit and value, so how could her artwork be excluded? Huang (personal communication, October 19, 2017) has to admit that some postmodern artists could more easily promote their work despite lacking good painting skills and concern for humanity. An outsider or an amateur could misunderstand and to draw an image of Our Lady using Kwan-Yin's characteristics, or blindly impress the public by creating religious art that has no soul. Costantini emphasized that, «Religious art is a complementary part of the liturgy and must strictly observe the sacred liturgy» (Huang, 2010, p. 23; Liu, 2003, p. 33). Huang (2010, p. 23) added that, «Creating religious art is like attending a feast; one must wear proper clothing. The same goes for an artist who wants to enter the church and join a religious art feast; he or she should dress appropriately.

How could a person uphold the message, «Who has seen me has seen the Father» if he or she lacks moral sense and behavior? There is a close link between religion and morality, which regards religion as a moral virtue. In fact, religious art has a purpose and its golden rule is to spread the gospel. Hence, true mission work has to be close to everyone's heart and emphasize the importance of inculturation through local art in order to deeply instill the message of the gospel in people's hearts.

During the last years of her life, Monica once mentioned that her only regret was that there were no ideal successors in the field of religious art, or nobody was interested in this field, but in spite of this, she never lost hope.

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