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ANGELO DA FONSECA : HIS ART AND

HIS PLACE IN INDIAN CHRISTIAN PAINTING

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The representation of Christian subjects in Indian style has been a significant and unique aspect of Indian painting during the past half a century. One of its foremost exponents is Angelo da Fonseca.

Prior to him, there are scattered examples of Christian themes making their appearance in the embellishment of churches and homes, and in the Mughal miniatures. But most of these were either imported or copies of western paintings executed under the guidance of western masters or copied by Indian artists. With Fonseca, one enters upon a very remarkable period in the history of Christian painting in India, especially in its phase of Indian interpretation. Realising the poor quality of painting existing then, and convinced of the need for indigenisation Fonseca set out to the task with determination. The attempts made by Alfred D. Thomas and Vinayak S. Masoji and others before and after Fonseca are not minimized. The single-minded devotion and dedication of Fonseca to the cause of Indo-Christian art and his large output far surpasses that of any other artists.

Though Fonseca made great advances in the sphere of indigenisation and his art is on a par with other modern painters, no due recognition is accorded to his life's work by his people. No serious effort has been made so far to collect his works, to study them and to compile them into a single work. The present study hopes to bring into focus the artistic genius of Fonseca in its varied manifestations in different media and techniques and to highlight his

contribution as a pioneer in the indignisation of Christian painting. This work is the fruit of in-depth search, study, analysis and evaluation made of his original works in the Collection of Ivy Fonseca, the widow of the artist, and from the paintings in the possession of the various institutions and individuals in Pune, Bombay and Goa, and of the photographs and prints of his other works (A list of his paintings is included in the Appendix).

Fonseca was born in 1902 in Santo Estovao near Old Goa. From his childhood he showed his talent for drawing and painting. Setting aside the prospects of a medical profession, he discontinued his medical studies and chose the career of an artist. He combined in himself artistic qualities with a profound faith - faith ⁱⁿ God and faith in man. He was a man of great courage, strong will and keen perception, and a prophet with a vision and a mission in life to which he was committed. The ideal he set before himself was to interpret the Christian faith and message in the culture and thought patterns of the country, whereby making it at home in India.

With this purpose in mind and with great desire to know and learn the traditional style of painting in India, Fonseca directed his steps to Bengal to be the student of the best Indian artists of the twenties. Here he studied art at the Oriental Art Society under the able guidance and direction of Abanindranath Tagore and later at Santiniketan under Nandalal Bose. He spent the formative years of his life in an atmosphere of simplicity and austerity imbibing the culture,

customs and spirit of traditional Indian life. During his stay there, he realised further that the future greatness of Indian art lay in original and new creations based on India's traditional styles and not in copying or assimilating the elements of western art. To this effect, he also preferred water colours to painting in oils. When he was leaving Santiniketan his Guru gave him the mandate, "Go back, young man and paint churches".* Though he did not contemplate this at the time he fulfilled this mission later by executing a number of murals in the Christa Prema Seva Sangha Ashram, St. Francis Xavier's Church, and in the chapel in the De Nobili College, all in Pune.

After his return from Santiniketan Fonseca lived for many years in quiet seclusion at the Christa Prema Seva Sangha Ashram, where he had taken refuge from adverse criticism in his home village in Goa. It was this quiet, peaceful Indian setting, the simple, ascetical life he shared in the ashram and above all, the hours spent in prayer that he found most congenial to his work. It was a period of groping, searching, experimenting and perfecting his style and technique.

Fonseca's aims in art, his training and the influences that shaped his talents are clearly outlined in Chapter III, while a brief survey of Christian themes in Indian painting prior to Fonseca forms the content of Chapter II. Having equipped himself with the necessary tools and training essential

* Some attribute this saying to Rabindranath Tagore and others to Abanindranath Tagore. The latter seems more appropriate as he was Fonseca's teacher and guide in art.

for the profession and true to his own convictions, Fonseca ventured enthusiastically into indigenizing Christian art, thus turning away from the stereotyped, sentimental or cheap reproductions of western christian painting in Catholic churches and homes. Like every pioneer Fonseca had to tread the lonely path to discovery. He had to face opposition and destructive criticism from various quarters. It was during this early period of struggles that Fr. Henry Heras, S.J., appeared like a beacon in his life. Fr. Heras became his life-long friend and supporter whom he portrayed in two of his paintings. He set Fonseca on the path to fame, both by gaining patrons for him and world-wide recognition, while at the same time inspiring him to ever greater achievements.

Among his patrons, Fonseca could count Cardinal Celso Constantini, the then Secretary to the Propaganda Fide. He acquired the twenty-two paintings illustrating the articles of the Creed, many of which are now in the Vatican Museum, Rome. Some of these he published in his work: *L'Arte Christiana nelle Missioni*. Through Fr. Heras, Fonseca came to know Mgr. Pieter Leo Kierkels, the then Apostolic Internuncio to India. He bought many of Fonseca's paintings including the series on the seven sacraments, a set of the stations of the Cross and Our Lady of the Lotus. Marion Batson, S.J., of Patna mission introduced his paintings to America and also to Sepp Schuller, Conservator of the Catholic Mission Museum at Aachen. He acquired some paintings for the Museum.

During the mid-forties to mid-fifties Fonseca received some acknowledgement. In 1944 the Bombay Art Society awarded him their Gold Medal at the Exhibition in Pune, for a painting in oils entitled Blessing of Loaves and Fishes. Between 1948-50 he travelled all over Europe holding one-man shows at important cities. In 1950, his paintings, together with those of many other Indian artists, were exhibited at the Vatican Exhibition of Indigenous Christian Art in Asiatic and African countries, held in connection with the Holy Year for which he received the Pope's Medal for his contribution. After this the governments of Spain and Portugal invited the Vatican Exhibition to Madrid and Lisbon. Again in 1951 Fonseca won the Bombay Art Society's Silver Medal and the Governor's First prize for the portrait of Ivy Fonseca (Artist's wife) in oil; and the Pope's Medal for his contribution to the Marian Congress Exhibition held in Bombay in 1954. The crowning glory of his artistic career was the presentation of the Gold Cross, 'Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice' conferred on him by Pope Pius XII in 1955 in recognition of his outstanding achievements in the realm of Indian Christian art.

Born and brought up in a devout Christian tradition and being a fervent Catholic, it is not surprising that his faith inspires his art. His vision was distinctly religious and his profound faith supplied ample themes for

the expression of his religious sentiment. His art is serious and deeply rooted in his soul. He spent much time in prayer before painting a picture. He was steeped in the mysteries of the life of Christ and familiar with the Holy Scriptures both the Old and the New Testaments. His reflections and meditations on these are revealed by the high spiritual quality he maintained in his work.

The themes that frequently appear in Fonseca's works are scenes connected with the birth and early life of Christ, his passion, death and resurrection - the Annunciation, Visitation, Nativity, Flight into Egypt, Presentation in the temple, Eucharist, Crucifixion, Pieta, Resurrection, and Christ at Emmaus. The Blessed Mother Mary is the subject of a large number of his paintings. He portrays her from her childhood to her assumption, presents her both in the joyful and sorrowful events of her life; and honours her under various titles. The series of paintings like the illustrations of the articles of the Creed, the Seven Sacraments, the mysteries of the Rosary, and the stations of the Cross also form an important part of his work. His devotional pictures, like the representation of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, the Holy Family, St. Joseph, and other saints, as well as themes on prayer, music, and historical paintings are a significant contribution to Indian Christian painting. Religious paintings do not exhaust the repertoire of his varied talents. They find expression in portraits, landscapes, interiors and other themes in water colour, oil and pastels.

In keeping with his needs and purposes Fonseca evolved a distinctive mode of expression. Like other artists, he drew inspiration from various sources, but his talents transformed the influences into a highly personalised style. In this new approach he consciously avoided the main features of the Christian painting popular at the time. The style he devised was simple, direct, forceful and elevated.

For purposes of study and analysis, the large output of Fonseca is divided into various periods. The early works of the 30's and 40's, where the first experiments in Indian style representation of Christian themes are attempted, form the subject matter of Chapter IV. The works of the 50's - the period of maturity and prolific creations especially of the Madonna theme are dealt with in Chapter V, while the significant contributions of the 60's and his experiments in other materials and techniques are studied in Chapter VI. Chapter VII is devoted to his secular works. In all these special attention is paid to outline the development of his style and thought.

The present personal study of Fonseca's paintings has revealed certain salient features of his art. Among the visual elements of expression Fonseca was attracted more than anything else by the beauty of line and its many possibilities. His style is essentially linear; he sees everything in terms of line, instead of patches of colour, light and shade or masses. With a compelling power he defines the form with lines, leading the eye first along the boundaries and edges

of the forms and then to the surface lines that outline details. Thus he emphasizes the limits of things and gives solidity to his individual figures and objects. The line forms the backbone of his art.

The ability to handle line as a medium of expression is clearly seen in Fonseca's drawings. With a few lines he brought out the essence of the figure or the object. His numerous drawings and paintings on black or gray paper with white or Indian red pigment bear ample testimony to his mastery of line. The line undergoes a thorough transformation in the course of his career. The rather fine, uncertain lines of his earlier works gradually develop into bold, manly, steady and telling lines of the works of the 60's.

Fonseca used the medium of line to visualize his thought, to express his feelings and emotions, his ideas and convictions, and to communicate them to others. Though linear language, he created and gave form to his deep faith and religious beliefs. These are illustrated with examples in Chapters IV, V and VI.

Stark simplicity characterises Fonseca's paintings. His compositions, direct and simple, involve only a few figures in most cases. In general, the paintings of his early period contained more figures and details, and as he matured they become fewer in number and details are shed. Often a figure or two compose a scene. Sometimes a single figure, as in many of his paintings of the 60's would suffice to tell a story or to convey a message. In his later works rarely did

he use background for his figures occupy the entire picture space with no room left for the background. Thus the onlooker's attention is caught and centred on the main theme or figure.

The materials Fonseca employed for his work speak of the simplicity of his art. It looked as though he used anything that was available and produced out of it a great work of art. The surfaces he used for the different media were ordinary sheets of drawing paper both white and coloured, canvas, strawboard, hardboard, pieces of ordinary wood, and at times even a torn sheet of paper from an exercise notebook or a piece of broken slate served the purpose. The majority of his works are small with the exception of his murals and a few large paintings in oil.

In his paintings Fonseca stresses the two-dimensionality of the picture-plane. Figures and objects are treated flat, giving hardly any sense of space. In a few instances they are placed at different levels and their size is regulated by their relative importance and distance in the picture, as seen in *Suffered under Pontius Pilate*, one of the paintings illustrating the articles of the Creed. In a few others, he used perspective and colour to suggest a feeling of space, as in *Christ giving the Keys to St. Peter*. In general, it is vain to search for the correct application of the principles of perspective in his works, for the simple reason that he was more concerned with translating the Christian message in the Indian context than with the details of laws and rules. He used it if it contributed to his purpose, otherwise left it out of the picture altogether.

The linear style which Fonseca developed found apt expression in the wash technique he learned in the Bengal School under Abanindranath Tagore and which he modified to suit his needs. His paintings have none of those evanescent qualities of otherworldliness and spatial feeling characteristic of the works of Abanindranath Tagore. He consciously avoided these qualities so as not to detract from the expression of spiritual realities. His figures, however, manifest another type of other worldliness, springing from the inner dynamism of his faith and beliefs.

Though he used the wash technique for most of his paintings, Fonseca was equally skilled in handling the transparent water colour technique. His many water colour portraits and landscapes show his mastery of the technique. With great dexterity, he employed pastels and oil medium. His pastel portraits, especially those of children, are marvellous studies bringing out their grace and charm with a few deft strokes. He tried his hand in other media as well, such as murals, paintings on cloth, as well as carvings on wood, tile, soft stone or slate. He also experimented with the techniques of making stained glass, and made designs for wrought iron, statues and sacred vessels.

Fonseca evolved a figure type in consonance with his ideals. Feeling the inadequacy of the human form to express the divine, he adopted a type using certain conventions. His representations of Christ, the apostles and other men saints do not conform to any particular Indian type. They are ordinary men, usually bearded, often dressed

in a long tunic with or without a shawl draped around. Their noble and dignified mien, with an aura of sanctity shining through their countenances, is a manifestation of Fonseca's own faith and vision.

His portrayal of women is typically Indian. By their features they can be identified as Goan, Maharashtrian or Punjabi. Their dress, ornaments, postures and setting reveal their origin. The basic shape of the face, especially of the Madonnas, can be traced to the pipal leaf format, with details added on. Sometimes he went to the extent of incorporating famous Indian personalities into his paintings. For example Gandhiji and Rabindranath Tagore are represented as the disciples in the Supper at Emmaus. Similarly Indian philosophers like Madhava, Ramanuja and Vallabha take the place of the Jewish religions^u teachers in Jesus in the Temple.

Fonseca's figures evoke a sense of repose and make one feel at home with them - possibly the result of his efforts to incarnate his faith in the culture of his people. His paintings of the 60's are remarkable as they reveal deeper realities and emotions, rather than mere external appearance. In his portfayals of the theme of prayer, man's longing and searching for a touch of God as well as the joy and peace he experiences in the presence of the Divine are revealed in the calm, serene and glowing countenances of the figures that represent the various aspects of prayer. These are illustrated in Chapter VI.

It is futile to look among Fonseca's religious paintings for ideals of beauty set forth by merely following a fixed proportion of the figure or by correct anatomical details. Hence one comes across figures with extremely long legs, thin spidery hands, shortened arms and elongated necks. But in many of his secular themes and portraits he observed correct details of anatomy and perspective.

The colours Fonseca used, like his technique and style, were thoroughly Indian. Like the artists of Ajanta who employed the locally available coloured stones to make their pigments, Fonseca prepared his colours from the argillaceous mud collected from Goa. Sometimes he mixed this with Windsor and Newton colours to obtain the required value and intensity of a particular hue. He applied these colours flat to the figures, objects and background without any attempt at modelling. He favoured the limited palette of a few sober hues - light green, light blue, Indian red, earth brown, ochre yellow and white. In his earlier works he used brighter hues for some of his paintings, but these were slowly toned down to sober ones in most of his later works. In a few paintings of his last years the brighter colours appear again. His religious paintings are generally executed in sober hues to evoke a mood of piety and to inspire devotion in the beholder.

Though the greater part of Fonseca's works are devoted to religious themes, he did find time to execute secular paintings as well. His secular works are in no way

inferior to his religious pictures. On the other hand, they seem more free and spontaneous when compared to the latter. At the beginning of his artistic career he set aside all secular motifs for a while, for fear lest he might become worldly in his approach to religious art. But his creations prove the contrary - they were not a hindrance to the blossoming of his religious concepts and expressions but rather beneficial in the sense that his secular themes were animated by his intense religious fervour. A large number of portraits in transparent water colour technique and pastels, landscapes, a few interiors and miscellaneous themes done in water colour, oil and pastel come under this category and are treated at length in Chapter VII.

Fonseca is a modern Indian painter who was ahead of his time, with the vision to see into the future. He broke away from traditions of western influences and modes of painting. Thus he liberated Indian Christian painting from European elements and placed it on a firm footing in the soil of his country. His contributions are unique in that he depicted Christian themes in Indian idiom and setting, and in this way did pioneering work in Indian Christian painting, for others to continue. For this reason, he has been called the "Father of Indian Christian Art" and the "Patriarch of Indian Christian Art". It is hoped that the present study will help to fill up a vacuum in the history of modern Indian painting by supplying new information on Angelo da Fonseca and his artistic genius.