

From Mao to Minnesota: Chinese artist He Qi persevered

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By Mary Thomas, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



"Holy Spirit Coming," by He Qi.

Chinese artist He Qi found solace in Raphael's *Madonna and Child* during the bleak nights of the Cultural Revolution, but it never entered his mind that years later he would be living in Minnesota and painting scenes inspired by the Bible.

An exhibition of Mr. He's vivid works will be on public display this week at East Liberty Presbyterian Church, where Mr. He will talk about them.

Mr. He was sent to the countryside during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, as were many of his urban compatriots, to become a farm laborer. But the middle school student wasn't accustomed to the very hard work required and looked for an avenue out, he explained in a phone interview from his home in Roseville, Minn.

A friendly neighbor who was a famed fine arts educator taught him the basics of painting before he left, enabling Mr. He to spend his days as an artist for Chairman Mao's regime. "I think I was lucky."

At night he looked through the art magazines he had brought with him and happened upon a painting of the Virgin Mary by the great Italian Renaissance artist Raphael. He painted a copy of it.

Mr. He was not Christian but was attracted to the image because it was "very peaceful" at a time when there was disturbance in every corner of China, he said. The mother tenderly holding the baby Jesus "touched my heart." But he wasn't able to learn more about Christianity at the time.

"During the Cultural Revolution all the churches in China were closed or destroyed," he said.

After five years, Mr. He returned to Nanjing, the former capital of China, where he was born and where his father had been a noted mathematician at Nanjing University. It was presumed that Mr. He would become his successor, but instead he decided to study art.

He also wanted to explore the Christian faith and went to a Catholic church, but found it closed. Through the window, he saw that it was filled with machinery. "It looked like a factory." The city's theological seminary was occupied by the Red Guard. "It was very hard to find the Christian message."

Mr. He persevered and became the first Mainland Chinese to earn a doctorate in comparative religious art after the Cultural Revolution. He wrote his dissertation while studying on a scholarship in Hamburg, Germany, where he developed an interest in medieval art. For 22 years he was a professor at the Nanjing Union Theological Seminary and was a tutor for master candidate students in the Philosophy Department of Nanjing University.

He first traveled to the U.S. in 1997 as a visiting scholar, and moved permanently with his family to Minnesota in 2004. In China, he was a full-time professor who painted part time, he said. Now he is a full-time artist who lectures part time.

The Rev. Dr. Randy Bush, pastor of the East Liberty Presbyterian Church, first learned of Mr. He while serving a congregation in Racine, Wis. He had seen Mr. He's work reproduced in a Presbyterian planning calendar, and someone had presented him a signed poster as a gift.

An opportunity to exhibit Mr. He's work arose when an exhibition of 30 prints closed at the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City earlier this year. Rev. Bush arranged to bring the artwork, and the artist, to Pittsburgh for the first time.

"They're very vibrant, very compelling," he said.

One gallery holds images derived from Old Testament stories, such as the Creation, Noah, King David and the prophet Elijah. The other gallery is all New Testament, "the Three Kings up through Jesus calming the sea to the last week and the Resurrection," Rev. Bush said.

Mr. He's artwork has been described as a stylistic blend of Chinese cultural types such as folk expression, Western modernism and medieval. Rev. Bush gave as example the image "David and Saul," with faces that look like the heavily made up warrior masks of Chinese opera. "These [familiar] stories re-personified with Asian influence."

Luther Seminary Pastor Robert Brusick of St. Paul, Minn., wrote in 1997 that Mr. He is "both storyteller and evangelist in his art. He is not only preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, but he is also conveying a message that transcends cultural types. In seeking to de-Westernize the Christian story, he is trying to open our eyes to the universal implications of the larger and all-encompassing narrative of God's love for all creation."

Mr. He's fondness for medieval stained glass is reflected in saturated areas of Sakura gouache colors within confident black strokes created with Chinese ink and brushes, on "very strong" rice paper handmade in Northeast China.

He has also painted with oil, made woodblock prints, and had his imagery translated into tapestries through an arrangement with weavers of the Tujia minority in China.

Seven- to-nine-color Giclee prints, sized 2-by-3 feet, are exhibited at the church. Rev. Bush said the artist prints each of them himself on archival paper. There are also posters available to purchase, which Mr. He will sign. Prints of varying size may be ordered from the artist's website (www.heqigallery.com).

"As a Christian, I think the most important gospel message should be peace," Mr. He said. "As a Christian artist, I think it is important to share the peaceful message through my artwork. Peace be with you."

The church is at 116 S. Highland Ave., East Liberty. The gallery will be open from 8 to 9:30 p.m. today, 9:30 a.m to 7 p.m. Thursday, 9:30 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. Friday, and noon to 2 p.m. Sunday. Mr. He will speak informally after the 7 p.m. Taize service today; he will present a formal illustrated talk following a 7 p.m. reception Friday; and he will be in the gallery from 12:15 to 1:30 p.m. Sunday to give a short talk and answer questions. Admission is free. Information: 412-441-3800 or www.cathedralofhope.org.