

**Susangeline Yalili Patrick**

***Art as a Pathway to God: A Historical-Theological Study of the Jesuit Mission to China, 1552-1773***

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Anmeldt av Frederick Hale

Francis of Assisi allegedly implored his fraternity in the faith to “Preach the Gospel always, and when necessary use words.” Apocryphal though his attributed admonition may be, missionaries who have propagated the Good News across cultural lines have long used various kinds of art to convey both the content of the Bible and specific ecclesiastical doctrines. Accordingly, the annals of church history are rich in the creation of mosaics, statuary, paintings, and other visual art forms. Such channels of Christian communication have themselves been culturally and thematically diverse; they have cropped up on one continent after another. As relative latecomers to this endeavor, members of the Society of Jesus used artistic media in a variety of cultural contexts nearly since the inception of their order, not least when teaching fundamentals of the Roman Catholic manifestation of Christianity to illiterate peoples. Snippets of this educational technique were highlighted in Robert Bolt’s acclaimed historical drama for the silver screen in 1986, *The Mission*, which depicted the forced closure of ministry to the Guaraní in South America in the eighteenth century.

However, scholarly analysis of Jesuit employment of the arts has advanced on an uneven front, quite understandably in light of the intercontinental nature of the topic, which began to take shape in the 1540s. Inheriting the recent legacy of the Renaissance, European members of the order, at times in tandem with indigenous artists, took their message both verbally and artistically to a broad spectrum of cultures. Examination of the ramifications of that transmission will undoubtedly unfold over a period of decades. One can point to its discussion in such pioneering works as Leonardo Cohen’s 2009 *The Missionary Strategies of the Jesuits in Ethiopia (1555-1632)*.

Dr. Susangeline Yalili Patrick is a multilingual and multicultural associate professor of global Christianity at Nazarene Theological Seminary in Kansas City whose research agenda encompassed several countries and Christian denominations. In creating *Art as a Pathway to God*, she cast a wide net encompassing sources ranging from museum visits, interviews, and archeological research to various kinds of published works, both primary and secondary. Her relatively brief text of slightly over 150 pages, supplemented by several dozen pages of appendices, began as a doctoral thesis at Asbury Theological Seminary and originally bore the title “Art as a Pathway to God:

A Historical-Theological Study of the Jesuit Mission to China in the Late Ming and Early Qing Dynasties (1552–1773)”. The chronological span is thus from three decades before Matteo Ricci’s benchmark arrival in Macao in 1582 to the suppression of the Society of Jesus by decree of Pope Clement XIV. Patrick establishes early on that in accord with the Counter-Reformation’s endorsement of the arts (which contrasted to a considerable degree with the iconoclasm of many though far from all early Protestants whose reluctance to employ visual aspects of such expression set them apart) became a deeply ingrained dimension of their outreach already in the first generation of the order’s existence. It could thus accompany Jesuit endeavors to China well before 1600.

Patrick further underscores that it was not merely a matter of Europeans imposing their continent’s artistic traditions unilaterally upon the churches they established during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. From an early stage there was appreciable input from Chinese artists, many of whom adopted the Christian faith. This aspect of cultural hybridity was thus woven into the warp and weft of Chinese Christianity by the time the latter dynasty began in the 1640s.

Earlier research on the admixture of Jesuit artistic traditions with Chinese culture is acknowledged. However, Patrick underscores that it generally focused on the surface, *i.e.* the visual and technical aspects of this adaptation, while either subordinating or ignoring entirely the deeper “theological themes and meanings emerging from these artworks” and “the missionary intentions behind the Jesuit engagement with art” – hence the title of her book. Accordingly, Patrick’s central purpose is to take steps towards redressing that neglect.

The overall structure of *Art as a Pathway to God* is uncomplicated. After establishing the justification for, scope, and methodology of her study, Patrick devotes a chapter to the unfolding of Christian art in China before the arrival of the Jesuits. This is followed by chapters that explore their use of art first in the Ming and then the Qing dynasties, paying particular attention to the specifically theological purposes and motifs involved. A sixth chapter takes up the considerable challenge of analyzing Chinese responses to and interpretations of the resulting – and in many cases patently hybrid – Christian works in several artistic categories. This last-named theme accords with a general shift of emphasis in recent decades from strongly Eurocentric to Sinocentric perspectives in the study of Chinese church history. Patrick concludes with a chapter that *inter alia* proposes avenues for further exploration of the topic.

In the last-named category, Patrick suggests that other scholars could carry the baton of research further by examining how the Jesuits used religious art in China after their papally suppressed order was restored in 1814 and re-established its Chinese presence in the 1840s. Moreover, their efforts elsewhere in Asia and in the Americas could provide fertile soil for comparative studies of the interplay of culture with Christian theology in non-Chinese environments. Extending the register of proposed comparisons beyond the Jesuit orbit, Patrick found fascinating examples of Russian Orthodox art in China expressing Christian doctrine in ways peculiar to that denom-

inational tradition.

Supplementing the text are dozens of fascinating photographic illustrations of representative works of art (some of which are not sufficiently large to permit appreciation of their details), a brief glossary of sometimes polysemous terms, chronological tables correlating works of art to historical circumstances, a small number of maps, and a 38-page bibliography of pertinent works in several European and Asian languages.

For the most part, *Art as a Pathway to God* is a carefully crafted and quite accessible approach to a historical topic that many Western readers might find arcane and distant from their own areas of specialization. It merits and rewards reading, offers insights into the efforts of the Jesuits to make their faith comprehensible to the Chinese through visual art, and provides part of the framework for understanding the culturally conditioned expansion of Catholicism in China during two centuries of noteworthy growth. One can only hope that other scholars will heed Dr. Patrick's plea and probe how visual arts have complemented the verbal proclamation of the Gospel to promote the propagation of Christianity internationally.