

This photograph is
available in the
print version of *Parables*.

**“We servants of the holy Samaritan with the talents we
have been given, that is the charity of God and of our
neighbor, can and should come to the aid of [our neigh-
bors’] bodily and spiritual misery.”**

Go and Do Likewise

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

The sixteenth-century Italian artist Jacopo Bassano thoroughly enjoyed parables as a source of inspiration for his paintings and a mode of communicating with his audience. So, too, does twenty-first-century Chinese artist He Qi (pronounced huh-chee), who combines Chinese folk customs and painting techniques with western modernism. His works on paper are recognized by their bright colors and flat, mosaic collage form.

Jacopo dal Ponte was born in Bassano del Grappa. After apprenticeship to his father, he frequently traveled to nearby Venice to train with Paolo Veronese (c. 1487-1553). There he was influenced by the paintings of Titian (c. 1485-1576) and drew inspiration from artists working in the style of the day known as *La Maniera* or Mannerism. The Mannerism of Jacopo Bassano featured elegant forms, rich color, textured fabrics, drawing from nature, and an attention to compositional organization that differed from that of the High Renaissance.

The artist married Elisabetta Merzati from Bassano and they had four sons, who became painters, and two daughters. Archival scholarship has revealed that "Jacopo Bassano was an avid reader, especially of holy scripture, and had a rigorous moral code, such that he would never paint scenes or figures that might arouse scandal."¹ He lived a secluded life in the town in which he was born. He declined invitations to hold public office and to work for foreign princes.

Jacopo frequently portrayed biblical narratives and especially favored the Gospel of Luke and parable scenes.² In the London *Good Samaritan* (c. 1557), he depicts the major characters in Christ's parable (Luke 10:30-35) just as the Samaritan rescues the traveler who "was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers" (10:30). The traveler is positioned on an elevated rock that enables the Samaritan to get behind him to hold him up. Bandages, applied earlier by the Samaritan, already are stained red with the man's blood. The two move toward the Samaritan's donkey, the lighter color of the saddle allowing its outline to be found in the darkened space on the right side of the painting. The flasks of oil and wine used to cleanse the traveler's wounds catch the light in the foreground.

Behind the Samaritan, in the middle distance on the left, are two other figures; according to the narrative, they are a priest and a Levite (10:31-32).

The second man, the Levite, holds two sticks and appears to be reading. Both passersby are dressed in dark secular garb. In contrast, the Samaritan wears a bright, rose-colored peasant garment with a flask attached at his waist.

The distant city has been identified as the artist's hometown of Bassano. Like other northern Italian cities, it was overrun with beggars. The message

He Qi's distinctly Chinese paintings counteract the tendency to equate "Christian Art" with "European Art." The artist reminds us that Christianity is not "only a Western religion."

of Christ's parable, that we should emulate the mercy of the Samaritan (and of Christ), was poignantly captured in contemporary Dominican preaching: "we servants of the holy Samaritan with the talents we have been given, that is the charity of God and of our neighbor, can and should come

to the aid of [our neighbors'] bodily and spiritual misery."³

Like Jacopo Bassano, the contemporary Chinese artist He Qi uses his art to speak for the poor and suffering. His family – his father taught mathematics at Nanjing University and his mother was an elementary school teacher – was driven into the countryside during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1978). Though all the Christian churches were closed and Western missionaries sent home, He Qi discovered Christianity through a portrait of the Madonna and Child. To earn a living, he taught himself to paint. During the day he painted pictures of Chairman Mao, but late at night he secretly copied paintings by Raphael and other Old Masters of the Italian Renaissance.⁴

He Qi earned a Ph.D. in religious art at Hamburg Art Institute, and spent another year studying medieval art in Germany in 1991. While he was serving as the 2005-2006 Paul T. Lauby artist-in-residence at the Overseas Ministries Study Center in New Haven, Connecticut, his work was exhibited at the Yale University Institute of Sacred Music. A twenty-seven piece tour of his paintings based on Old Testament stories, titled "Look toward the Heavens," began touring the United States. He Qi has been creating modern Chinese Christian art since 1983. Recently he moved to America after teaching for many years at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary.

The Good Samaritan reflects He Qi's "peaceful message" of Christian charity through a flat but colorful style that the artist describes as "color on paper." The composition depicts the Good Samaritan putting the wounded traveler on his donkey in order to take him to an inn for further care (Luke 10:34). In the background we see the priest and Levite walking away, their hands outstretched from their sides. Just as Jacopo Bassano modeled the



He Qi. *THE GOOD SAMARITAN*, 2001. Gouache on Rice Paper, 32" x 32". Photo: © He Qi (www.heqiarts.com). Used by permission of the artist.

biblical characters on figures from his world, so He Qi depicts them as contemporary Chinese figures.

Concerned that “ordinary Chinese people...associate Christian art only with certain Western images taken from Renaissance religious paintings,” He Qi tries to bridge the gap between East and West.⁵ This change, he says, must start within the church itself, particularly the Chinese church. “We need to produce Christian art in a Chinese indigenous way so that people will know the Gospel message also belongs to Chinese people, and not just to foreigners,” he writes, for Christianity is not “only a Western religion” – and his distinctly Chinese paintings counteract the tendency to “equate ‘Christian Art’ with ‘European Art.’”

Over the centuries, artists as diverse as Jacopo Bassano and He Qi have lifted up the Samaritan as a model of mercy for their contemporaries. Of course, when Jesus told the lawyer who wondered “Who is my neighbor?”

to “Go and do likewise” in imitation of the Samaritan (Luke 10:37), Jesus wanted him to imitate the Samaritan’s *character* and not merely his *actions* in this story. To be merciful like the Samaritan (and like God) means we do more than assist the suffering individuals whom we encounter. We must care deeply enough about their misery to work toward structural changes in unjust systems that lie behind their suffering.⁶

Bassano’s and He Qi’s paintings can inspire us not only to examine our individual actions of mercy, but also to critique our social institutions and make them more merciful.

NOTES

1 Paolo Berdini, *The Religious Art of Jacopo Bassano: Painting as Visual Exegesis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

2 For more information, see Heidi J. Hornik and Mikeal C. Parsons, *Illuminating Luke: The Public Ministry of Christ in Italian Renaissance and Baroque Painting* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2006), 82-109.

3 Bernard Aikema, *Jacopo Bassano and His Public: Moralizing Pictures in an Age of Reform ca.1535-1600* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 48-49.

4 He Qi, Keynote Speech at 2006 Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) Global Mission Event in Amherst, MA. Video online at www.heqiarts.com/Photos/pages/Speech.html, accessed 19 September 2006.

5 Interview with He Qi, online at www.asianchristianart.org/profile/HeQi/pages/HeQi-interview.html, accessed 21 September 2006.

6 See, for example, Ronald J. Sider, Philip N. Olson, and Heidi Rolland Unruh, *Churches That Make a Difference: Reaching Your Community with Good News and Good Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002).



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