JYOTI SAHI’S SYNTHESIS BETWEEN WESTERN CHRISTIANITY AND TRADITIONAL INDIAN ART

Stefan Belderbos

In 1602, a painting with the title ‘Madonna del Popolo’ (dedicated to S. Luke) was put on display in a church in Agra, India.1 Agra was at that time part of the Mogul empire. Emperor Akbar was very interested in religious issues and since he wanted to find out more about western Christianity he invited, among others, Christian missionaries to his court. These missionaries brought with them images of Christian European art. Paintings were for them an important tool for converting the population to Christianity. Du Jarric, a contemporary eyewitness, gives a colourful, if not personal, account of the miraculous effect the painting ‘Madonna del Popolo’ had on the Indian population.

One day during the octave, some poor women who lived near the church, having asked and received permission to enter the building, were so deeply moved by the beauty of the picture that they went out and proclaimed on all sides its wonders and perfection, so that the tidings passed from mouth to mouth until they were spread throughout the city. In consequence, a huge crowd collected at the church, the people leaving their shops and their work to come and see this marvel. (....) The picture affected them in a manner that was wholly miraculous; for it aroused in them not only wonder, but remorse for their sins, while at the same time it brought exceeding consolation to their hearts. In short, as they went away, the Fathers were amazed at the change that had come over them.2

Christianity has existed in India for quite some time. India’s own Christian tradition goes back to a period not later than the beginning of the sixth century and perhaps from a considerably earlier date, when the Thomas-Christians settled in Kerala and surroundings.3 Because of the missionary activities that started at the beginning of the colonial expansion of Portugal, the original Indian Christian traditions became less visible. Christianity in India became almost completely associated with the European religious tradition. Visual arts, the most important medium in India to express religious ideas and opinions, refer mainly to European images when dealing with Christianity. The work of the artist Jyoti Sahi is, however, an exception

1 A.Camps, Jerome Xavier S.J. and the Muslims of the Mogul Empire, 239.
2 Ibid, 239 -240.
to this rule. He combines the rich tradition of Indian symbols with western styles of painting and by doing so he creates a new Christian iconography. He is searching for a new imagery that connects with the history and traditions of the Christian population of India. His paintings are closely linked to his theological opinions and his faith.

In this article I will to discuss the different perception of visual art in Europe and India. Subsequently I will give a description of the wrong interpretations and lack of communication resulting from these different points of view. Both issues create the framework that I will use to discuss and analyze the work of Jyoti Sahi. In order to do so I will present three case studies, based on a short analysis of three paintings Jyoti Sahi.

Indian art Through Western eyes

This chapel is two paces wide in each of the four sides, and three paces high, with doors covered with devils carved in relief. In the midst of this chapel there is a devil made of metal, placed in a seat also made of metal. The said devil has a crown made like that of the papal kingdom, with three crowns; it has also four horns and four teeth with a very large mouth, nose and most terrible eyes. The hands are made like those of a flesh-hook and the feet like those of a cock; so that he is a fearful object to behold. All the pictures around the said chapel are those of devils, and on each side of it there is a Sathanas (i.e. Satan) seated in a seat which is placed in a flame of fire, wherein are a great number of souls, of the length of half a finger and a finger of the hand. And the said Sathanas holds a soul in his mouth with the right hand and with the other seizes a soul by the waist.

This is the account of the Italian Ludovico Varthema who visited a Hindu temple in South India (Calicut) in the beginning of the sixteenth century. His description is an example of the way in which Europeans valued Hindu art for a long time. The sculptures and paintings of gods reminded them of the western images of devils, hell and the Apocalypse. Hindu temples brought the terrifying paintings of Hieronymus Bosch and Breughel to life. The richly decorated, and in western eyes nightmare-like images would not receive real recognition in Europe until the twentieth century.

Since the eighteenth century, when the Europeans were less disturbed by thoughts of the devilish nature of this art, they developed an eye for the parallels between the classical Greek and Indian mythology. Scientific studies made traditional Indian art less strange and incomprehensible. Still, Indian art was considered a noble form of manual labour until the twentieth century. It was not assigned to the realm of the fine arts. The English writer and art