



ON THE COVER

## HE QI: FROM MAO TO MOSES TO MINNESOTA

*Rich Melheim*

It's Chagall meets Matisse meets Picasso meets the East. Vibrant. Energetic. Breathtaking. Biblical. Humorous. Whole-world art.

Every painting of He Qi could be made into a stained-glass window.

And it's all beautiful. The artist is able to capture biblical scenes in a way that lets the stories tell themselves. You don't need a translator. You don't need an interpreter. You simply need time to look, to soak it in, to wonder, to wander, and to ponder.

I stumbled upon the talent of He Qi online in the early 2000s while looking for some Advent art and was captivated by his unique style. I was searching for something fresh and unseen that would cross cultures, so I emailed the artist cold one morning at 8:00 a.m. By 8:30 a.m. I had a new friend half a world away.

I asked He Qi if we could share his work with our Faith Inkubators network. He said yes. A few months later I needed four pieces to show to twenty-three thousand teens at fifty hotels across America. He said, "Yes—good publicity." I thanked him for his kindness and asked what I could do to repay him. He explained that he wanted his son to go to college in America, but the SARS epidemic of 2003 and mountains of government red tape had made it impossible. To make a long story short, after six months, a mailing to thirty-six thousand churches, and a number of phone calls and letters to embassies and officials, the most remarkable living interpreter of the faith I've ever met was landing with his wife and son at a Minnesota airport on a rainy day in May 2004. They moved into our home for a year and into our hearts forever.

### *The Beginnings*

As odd as it may sound, He Qi (pronounced "huh chee") may have Chairman Mao to thank for becoming the most prolific Christian artist of a billion people. When He was a high school student, the Cultural Revolution erupted in China and his father's university was closed down. He was sent to the fields to do hard physical labor; he hated it.

"I wasn't strong enough to work in the fields," says He.

"In those days every little town with a wall needed a painting to venerate. I thought maybe if I could paint Chairman Mao's portrait, I would be lucky!" He returned to Nanjing, where he met his neighbor and elder, Professor Nu Sibai, the former chair of the art department at Nanjing Normal University. With the coaching of Nu Sibai, He won a painting competition and was relieved from agricultural labor. Professor Nu Sibai had received his education in Paris in the 1930s and then worked with Xu Beihong, the most important art educator in China in the twentieth century. While mentoring He Qi, Nu Sibai taught him to paint formal works using magazine pictures of Renaissance art.

"By day, I painted Chairman Mao. By night, Raphael's Madonna!" says He. "It was a time of great struggle. Everywhere you turned people were rioting in the streets, condemning everyone else. I looked into the peaceful eyes of Raphael's Madonna, and it touched my heart." This training in the art of the Italian Renaissance was the beginning of his journey toward the Christian faith and a career in art.

A dozen years later the Cultural Revolution wound down and universities reopened. He Qi expanded his career as an artist in Jiangsu, a province along the eastern coast of China. Student unrest and other political problems led him to move to Tibet, where he worked for three years restoring artworks on temple walls that had been destroyed. There he reconnected with a college friend, Yu Hua, who was teaching music and dance. They soon married. Their first son died as a child in Tibet. A second son, Song Yang, was born and the couple lavished their care and dreams on him. "In China we have the one-child policy. We call the one child 'the little emperor,'" He says with a smile.

A quest to research medieval Western art next took the artist to Germany. He wrote his dissertation while studying at the Hamburg Art Institute, where he became the first person from mainland China after the Cultural Revolution to earn a Ph.D. in religious art. He used his degree to obtain a professorship at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary and to tutor master's degree candidates in the philosophy department of Nanjing University.

*Continued on page 62*

### *Life in America*

He Qi spent his first year in America as a guest at the Melheim home in Stillwater, Minnesota, and artist-in-residence at Faith Inkubators. In the spring of 2005 he traveled to the mountains of Colorado to paint a fourteen-foot “Creation” mural and to sketch what would become a traveling show of Old Testament works called “Look Toward the Heavens.” He Qi returned to China for a summer of painting, logging eighteen-hour days locked in his home to bring the Bible stories to light and life. His bright colors and style for these new works exploded from the canvas. He returned with the new pieces, which we hope will one day form the core of a 120-piece exhibition and the *He Qi World Bible*, to be printed in English, Spanish, and Mandarin.

“In much of Chinese Zen art, there is no light. No color. Only simple black on a white background,” says He. “I believe God is the God of creation! He proclaims, ‘Let there be light!’ so a Christian’s art should be colorful and bright.”

In his second year in the United States, He moved to New Haven, Connecticut, to begin an artist-in-residency period at the Overseas Ministries Study Center. The originals from his time as artist-in-residence, along with a collection of selected New Testament works, became the Lenten exhibition in the gallery of Yale Divinity School’s Institute of Sacred Music. This show continued to travel around the country until the summer of 2007, when five of He’s works were displayed at the American Bible Society’s Museum of Biblical Art on Broadway in New York.

### *The Artist’s Process*

He Qi begins each painting by researching a Bible story. He then does a series of sketches that highlight multiple aspects of the story. When he has chosen the sketch he feels best depicts

the story, he paints the outline using a black stone ink on the reverse side of a 32” x 32” piece of thin rice paper. Next he turns the painting over and adds color using a Japanese gouache (tempera) paint. When the painting is almost dry, he does something odd: he crushes the entire work into a small ball, then flattens it out again. This creates the unique pools of paint, creases and smudges that couldn’t be done with a brush. The work is then attached to a second piece of rice paper, creating some surprises in the way the color bleeds through and makes its own patterns on the paper.

“Many times the entire work is destroyed in the process,” says Dr. He. “It breaks my heart, but I have no choice but to start all over again.” He finishes by adding final splashes of color, and final outlines of black stone ink over the top.

He Qi then brings his originals to the city of Suzhou, where silk masters have been creating robes and stunning art since the days of the caesars and the Silk Road that led from China to Rome. Using ancient techniques and vibrant colors, master embroiderers create four large-sized hand-sewn silk copies of each original painting. These are painstakingly made and breathtakingly beautiful, with each thread adding its own color to the art.

“I go back in six weeks and if I don’t like the way the colors are going, I have them tear it out and start again,” says He.

Each original is then turned into eighteen large-sized (30”x 30”) signed and numbered artist proof giclée prints on museum-quality acid-free paper by the artist himself. Any that don’t meet his standards for color and sharpness are torn up and discarded. “My wife gets mad at me. She says, ‘You are tearing up money!’ But if it isn’t a perfect representation of the original, I don’t want my name on it.” An additional twenty-eight medium-sized (20”x 20”) and fifty small (12”x 12”) prints are made of each image before the artist is finished.

Then it is on to sketch the next

paintings, and the next, and the next. This process will continue until his *He Qi World Bible* is finished.

### *A Christian Journey*

People often ask He Qi how he came to faith and why he paints only Bible scenes. With his talents he could have a wider reach and make a lot more money in the art and design world. “There are two ways one may become a Christian in China,” says He. “One is through parents and grandparents and their teaching. The other is a journey to find peace and the truth. Mine was the second way. I found both in the gospel message. Why should I paint anything else?”

That peace and that truth have been the driving force behind He Qi’s art and the focus of his life. He doesn’t see a need to veer away from that force and focus.

On one occasion, however, He Qi allowed a contemporary tragedy to shape his art. He was riding in a taxi in Nanjing on September 11, 2001, when the driver said something about “America getting what it deserved.” He asked the taxi driver to stop the car; he got out and walked home. Shaken and saddened by the event, he did the only thing he could do—he painted. Today the only non-biblical painting of his last twenty years is a gripping work entitled “Freedom and Peace.” It shows the Statue of Liberty with a tear in her eye, embraced by an angel falling from the sky.

### *He Qi’s Reach*

He Qi has been committed to the creation of modern Chinese Christian art since 1983. He hopes to help change the “foreign” image of Christianity in China through art, and at the same time, to supplement Chinese art the way Buddhist artists did in ancient times. In his works, He Qi blends Chinese folk customs and traditional Chinese painting techniques with Western art from the Middle Ages and the modern era. In doing so, he has

created a fresh and distinctive artistic style of color-on-paper painting.

According to the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Dr. Qi “ranks as arguably China’s most internationally sought after contemporary Christian artist.” His brilliant, colorful, and highly contemporary paintings emerge unmistakably from ongoing Chinese contexts.

His art work has been introduced through such media organizations as the BBC, HK Cable TV, *Asian Week*, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, *Christianity Today*, *The Upper Room*, Augsburg Fortress Press, *Sing Tao Daily News*, *The World Daily* and Faith Inkubators. His paintings have been well received in Kyoto, Hong Kong, Geneva, Hamburg, London, St. Paul, Madison, San Francisco, and Berkeley, as well as on mainland China. Twelve of his paintings were used for the Presbyterian Church (United States of America) calendar in 2004. In 2005, one of his works, “The Nativity,” was enlarged to twenty by twenty feet and hung on the historic Commander Grain Elevator in Stillwater, Minnesota. There, He’s painting presented Christmas greetings to fifteen thousand drivers each day on behalf of his first American home town.

After his 2006 artist-in-residency at Yale, one of He Qi’s paintings shared the cover of a new book, *The History of Christian Art*, with works by Marc Chagall and John August Swanson. That autumn He Qi became an artist-in-residence at Oxford University in England and was invited to paint a mural for the two hundredth anniversary of the Church Mission Society (CMS). In 2008 *Christianity Today* published a major feature article on He Qi’s his life and work, “From Mao to Moses.” In 2009, the Methodist devotional magazine *The Upper Room* is featuring his works on the cover of the magazine, which reaches every continent and is translated into sixty-five languages. Also in 2009, the Billy Graham Center Gallery at Wheaton College in Illinois invited the artist to gather the largest collection of his works ever assembled—forty-five in

all—for a major retrospective. That show is on display at the college through June 2009, when it will begin a national traveling exhibit to Central Presbyterian in Atlanta (June–August), Concordia Seminary in St. Louis (September–November), and other major cities from there.

On the covers of this issue of *Lutheran Forum* you see two recent paintings. “Calling St. Paul” shows Saul dressed in the Beijing Theater-style armor of a Chinese warrior. Christ comes in the dove-like flame to challenge and change the heart of the church’s greatest enemy. He Qi’s latest work, “Holy Spirit Coming,” pictures the red dove-like flames dancing on the heads of three people. The four corners show the reach of God’s power, beyond the western world (upper right) to the countryside (upper left), to the city (lower left), and over the waters and bridge to China.

#### *What’s Next?*

He Qi will continue to paint, lecture, and evolve as an artist, sharing his life, his story, and his art with the world to spread the news that the gospel message is for all peoples. He is working

with me—whom he calls his “free agent”—to finish three major curricula for Faith Inkubators that feature a different painting every week for children and youth ministries. We are also discussing the possibility of traveling art shows in Australia and Europe. The big dream: the illustrated Bible with online connections to music, games, devotions, and cartoons.

Woven throughout the works of this creative interpreter of the faith is the peaceful message of the gospel. That is also the message of his life. May his work bring you a little closer to the peace and truth a sixteen-year-old once found while looking into the eyes of the Christ child.

I am honored to call him friend. ✠

RICH MELHEIM is the founder and chief creative officer of the Faith Inkubators Project ([www.faithink.com](http://www.faithink.com)). More of He Qi’s work can be seen at [www.heqigallery.com](http://www.heqigallery.com).

#### *Resurrection*

