

Jesus and Death

1. Christianity arrived in Africa and many European colonies firmly, confusingly wrapped in capitalism, competition, and profit. For generations thereafter, Christians in these former colonies have fought back to find for themselves -- their own faces, cultures and indigenous spiritualities within the Gospel stories. Effectively, artists have bridged the gap, claiming title to BE with a black Jesus dying on a cross -- prayerfully and proudly there in the Gospel -- dressed in colorful, contemporary mid-African clothes. Although there are no halos, the flat-gold back-ground, from a medieval icon tradition, speaks of hope, holiness and promises of being absorbed in Mystery. Thus, native imagery enhances and completes the fullness of Christ on earth. [MafaJesus--Northern Cameroon]
2. Indian artist, Frank Wesley pictures Jesus' feet hanging against a stark white dagger representing the sharp desolation of Good Friday, as well as a reminder of the curtain torn in the temple -- a revealing the blinding light of God's presence. Behind the cross is a ()-shape, a full-body halo called a mandorla, sacred to East and West. At the foot of the cross, this rip in the fabric of life opens to another dimension. A monumental figure mourns -- encompassing all the sufferings of humankind, hoping for forgiveness and love. The splash of crimson red reflects the anger of the crowd, the ache of his followers and the passion a love of God. According to Wesley, the painting as a whole embodies the moment when eternity intervenes in time.
3. After being released from Stalin's Gulag in 1953, Russian artist Nikolai Getman risked his life and his family's to record in honest detail and in secret, the unimaginable, inhuman cruelties employed in the hidden Soviet "labor camps". For the least insignificant misdeed, a negative remark to a guard, a prisoner could be stripped naked, hung on a tree and left to be fed upon by mosquitoes. Within thirty minutes to an hour, he would be taken down and left to bleed to death within hours. As horrific and un-thinkable as Punishment by Mosquitoes, Getman writes that his paintings are a testimony to his belief, "I not have survived without the absolute conviction good will triumph over evil." He had been imprisoned for eight years without trial, for being-in the-room when another artist who drew a political cartoon criticizing Stalin.
4. Crucifixion by British artist Craigie Aitchison, in response to your pure-gold moments of "aloneness" and "emptiness". Ironically, the artist felt the same way as he painted many stark, vibrantly colored crucifixions over his lifetime, he wrote: I bring my own stories and sensibilities of personal spiritual significance -- as painting is intended to do. However, rather than literal depictions, his luminous Christ figures reach beyond the personal to the metaphoric - always isolated, suspended above distance horizons and backed by spacious, colorful landscapes with few but noteworthy details. Critics praise these colorful semi-abstracts for "injecting new vitality and resonance into religious subjects." In this painting, Christ is only slightly more substantial than a mirage, blurring distinctions between real and the imaginary. Isolated, He is suspended between two worlds - against a barren environment with two other faint blue crosses from a distant, green horizon. His only witness is a desolate rising moon. The flat backdrop of complementary colors -- a vivid, fertile orange earth joined with the overwhelming, blue-black storm -- may signify a meeting of opposites.
5. As an accomplished Indonesia artist, Noehani Harsono painted The Savior of the World -- a paradoxical image. Instantly, his work evokes a sense of intimacy with the vibrant, calm beauty of Christ's face. Yet as Isaiah reminds us, He is also, a man of sorrows, familiar with suffering. He is now without beauty, a thing despised and rejected by men. Then again, on the other hand, more seeming contradictions: on him lies a punishment that brings peace and by his bruises we are healed. (Is. 53:2-5). While religion don't tells us the whys of pain, there are possibilities offered that may suggest how. For Buddhists, unwanted suffering may open us to greater love of oneself and compassion for others. For Christians, suffering may be valued as redemptive, transforming those who participate fully, willingly in the mystery of Christ's Incarnation. This bright colors in Harsono's painting remind me of an unforgettable moment when a theology professor startled me awake one day -- and after he spoke I heard nothing more he said. The moment of Jesus' death on the cross was the very same moment of His resurrection.
6. For American artist William Congdon: Art is one of the purest means of discovering the Truth of the Mystery of God in us. This abstract-expressionistic image is a personal work of resisting his conventionally, strict New England Puritan background. He spent years after World War II traveling through Asia and Europe (with his paint brush), hoping to heal in his search for the sacred. In 1958, he converted to Catholicism, drawn in part, by his fascination with Italian religious art. This Crucifixio painting is meant to be seen not from the outside, but sensed and felt rather from an inner eye. In a religious and artistic autobiography, My Disc of Gold he writes: I paint for no other reason than to discover that beyond the literal narratives there is an inner spiritual and active eye imprinted on our souls. As a true artist, his inner spirit must embrace the spirit of his time. Then, the forms he discovers or intuits will reveal the secret depths of the people -- meanings emerging from an unconscious layer of long sought, often elusive faith. If it is a true work of art, it is not an exact representation of the God-man, but an invitation to participate in the Christian mystery of compassion.

