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FRANK WESLEY : RELIGIOUS WORKS

RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION

GERALDINE WHEELER

An exhibition of religious works by the Indian/Australian artist Frank Wesley (1923-2002) was held at the gallery of McAuley Campus, Banyo, Brisbane, of the Australian Catholic University National, in August 2004. These are all works which are to be found in the Wesley family collection or in other private collections in South East Queensland. We include here the catalogue essay by Geraldine Wheeler and reproductions of certain key paintings. Several of the other works referred to in the essay have been reproduced in Naomi Wray, *Frank Wesley: Exploring Faith with a Brush*, Auckland, Pace Publishing, 1993. Page references are given for Wray's book, where possible, when no reproduction of the work was available for this E-journal article.

Catalogue Essay

Frank Wesley (1923 – 2002) was essentially an Indian artist, expressing the Christian story and its meaning within a framework of an Indian setting, with an Indian imagination, and starting from the painting styles and techniques of his indigenous culture, particularly the Lucknow watercolour school technique and the Bengal Renaissance style. This was expanded through other Asian and western influences from several years of study also in Japan and the USA. In the final decades of his life, when he lived in Nambour, the impact of different Australian landscapes also came to be expressed in several of his works. Although his Christianity was formed in the Methodist tradition, his choice of religious themes was not confined to that of Protestant art (Rembrandt was an important artist for him), and he drew upon the visual traditions of Catholicism in European art and sought to re-interpret Indian religious iconography with Christian reference. This last aim was new and daring in the middle of the twentieth century, although the importance of the enculturation of Christianity in aesthetic forms other than those of western Europe is now quite widely recognised. His influence on other Indian Christian artists has been strong and as a founding member of the Asian Christian Art Association, contributing to the magazine *Image* and having works reproduced in the books authored by Masao Takenaka, *Christian Art in Asia* and *The Bible through Asian Eyes* (with Ron O'Grady), he was widely respected across the whole region.

Wesley's work is well known in Christian circles in Japan and in several churches in the USA. That is where many of his paintings are to be found. His work has been reproduced in church teaching material, particularly in his homeland and the USA, it has featured on calendars (The Netherlands), and The Uniting Church in Australia has reproduced it for Christmas cards. In 1950 five of his paintings were exhibited in the Holy Year Exhibition at the Vatican, with *Mary Magdalene Washing the Feet of Jesus* winning the Pius XII Silver Medal. (Wray, p.37) This was reproduced in *Life* magazine in the USA. (The *Magdalene* print in this exhibition is from the woodblock based on the same image.) Two unique achievements for Wesley were the use of his painting *The Blue Madonna* on the first UNICEF Christmas card (1947) and the choice of his design for the urn to hold the ashes of the Mahatma Gandhi for their immersion in the water at the junction of the Ganges and Jumna rivers (1947).

The works in this exhibition may be grouped into the following categories:

1. The watercolours in the Lucknow tradition (involving several layers of transparent colour and very fine detail) on both paper and silk.
2. The large oil paintings, a medium which Wesley learned to use at a later stage of his career.
3. The miniatures, both in egg tempera with gold leaf and watercolour, which adapt the Indian miniature traditions (from China via Persia, and the Rajasthani style) and which also contain elements of the work of the children's book illustrator, Edmund Dulac.
4. Three woodblock prints, which relate to paintings on the same themes and which are located in overseas institutions. They are some of the most widely known of Wesley's images, "**The Forgiving Father**," (Wray, pp.41,45) "Magdalene," (Wray, p.37) and "Christ at Cana" (Wray, p.51). These particular prints were hand printed in oil-based ink on Japanese rice paper or large sheets of Cambridge cartridge paper by myself in recent years, not by Wesley who, in earlier times, would have preferred to use Japanese water-based ink for an even, soft texture.



Forgiving Father

A feature of many of the works is the matting and framing, also done by Wesley, including the brushwork of hand drawn lines in various colours. His preference was not to use glass, but for reasons of preservation, glass or perspex is now placed over most of the images on paper and silk. (The two miniatures, 12 and 13, are as originally framed by Wesley without glass.)

All the works can be appreciated for their initial visual impact and from observation of the detail within. However, a full understanding often requires a knowledge of the symbols used, the colour symbolism and the traditions behind the works. Frank Wesley would often say that he was not interested in illustrating the biblical stories. He understood illustration to be the depiction of a scene as it may be observed with detachment. He set out to search for and

express meanings, using both traditional and personal symbolism and all the possibilities offered by the techniques he used. He saw himself as not an artist with one technique and style, but as one who chose a style to be a fitting component of the depiction of the subject matter or theme.

The remainder of this essay attempts to give such information about the works as will assist in the understanding of the layers of meaning of his religious works. (His considerable output of landscapes and genre scenes is not the focus of this exhibition.) For this I am very indebted to Athalie Wesley, to Naomi Wray's book, *Frank Wesley: Exploring Faith with a Brush*, Auckland, Pace Publishing, 1993, and to Frank Wesley's conversations with me over the 13 year period I was privileged to know him and observe the progress of whatever was his current work.

The work *Mary Goes to Visit Elizabeth* (No. 24, Wray, p.173) is a good starting place because Wesley has written notes about the symbolism on the back. This serves as a guide to many other works also. The figure of Mary is in the centre of an almost circular shape of bright, flat vermilion colour, symbolising the creation, pregnant with the creator. The peacock behind her represents the glory of Christ. Mary is clothed in the events of the future. The design on her skirt shows angels, kings and shepherds. Her apron has a phoenix design, suggesting resurrection. The thatched home tells of humble origins, the golden sky of happiness in heaven. The trees, the banana and the mango, are symbols of fruitfulness, touched in gold to indicate God's presence. Each bird bears a meaning: the crane denotes asceticism, the jacana happiness, the parakeets joy and the doves holiness. The waves in the pond are formed to suggest a multitude of fish, an early Christian sign.



“This is one of the few paintings the artist has ever agreed to interpret fully in words. It is clear that he assigns specific meaning to almost every detail of his paintings. The amazing thing is that the meanings are entirely consistent, never arbitrary. While some colour

meanings carry a variety of implications, each is unified by basic emotional or traditional foundations.” (Wray, p. 172)

Perhaps the most controversial of Wesley's efforts at expressing the Christian faith in the Indian visual cultural traditions is *Before Abraham was I am* (No. 10, Wray, p.113), painted in 1949. At first glance it appears to be either Hindu or Buddhist iconography, the depicting of transcendent deity in a female form. “She is the perfection of inactive deity,” says Wray. “In her right hand is a delicate lotus bud, indicating that the deity is not yet in human form.” (Wray, p.112) Here the artist is starting from within the Indian tradition and placing within it the newness of the Christ, rather than asking those who are formed in the Indian religious imagination to accept the full importation of a European imagery for the Christian story. Wesley often spoke of his rejection for Asia of the “fair-haired, blue-eyed Jesus” image, which so often appeared in the publications brought by the missionaries. (There is a parallel in what some Australian indigenous Christians are attempting today when they draw on the rainbow serpent image as a Holy Spirit image, representing the presence of God in this land before the coming of the Gospel of Christ.)



The miniature series (Nos. 16 –23), painted in 1962, depicting key scenes in the birth and early childhood narratives of Jesus, with Mary and Joseph, is done in egg tempera, i.e. pure pigments mixed with egg yolk, a technique used also for icons and much medieval painting. The story content is Christian, and the imagination is Indian. When red or vermilion is used, it signifies happiness and joy. The baby Jesus is

always blue, making reference to his divinity. (Fig. 1,2,3,4, Wray, pp.133, 134,135,137) Every detail carries meaning and both these egg tempera works and the watercolour miniatures show Wesley's mastery in working on a small scale in great detail.

The early watercolours, e.g. *Ruth and Naomi* (No. 6) executed in the early 1940's, show Wesley's early mastery of that medium. The Lucknow approach is the layering of transparent washes to obtain translucency of colours. Throughout his life he also experimented with the possibilities of the technique according to the textures of the papers used and as a vehicle for expressing the layers of meaning. Not only colour but texture as well must be fitting for and contributing to the meaning. Often his work bears what Wray calls a “double entendre.” At a

distance the painting is seen as a landscape, often rugged mountain forms. But within this are human forms and forms suggesting the hand of God. *Daniel in the Lions' Cave* (No 7, Fig. 5, Wray, p. 210) is representative of this approach, where the human story is to be found embedded in the natural world. Again this is an adaptation of an older approach in the traditions of painting in Asia. In this work, the person central to the story is a very small figure dwarfed in a rugged landscape. Daniel is in the centre at the bottom of the painting in a pool of light, held in the hand of God. The lions can be discovered in the walls of the cave. This painting was inspired by a visit to Carnarvon Gorge in central western Queensland, when Wesley saw the rocks lit by moonlight. The light is similar in *Light Shines in the Darkness* (No 13) and the figures are embedded in the dark rock face.

Wesley painted several large oil works, depicting crowd scenes in the life of Jesus. Two of these are exhibited here.

Were you there? (No. 14, Wray, p.75) is a scene on the road to Calvary. It was painted in six weeks during a Lenten period so that it could be displayed on Good Friday in the Nambour Lutheran Church. On the left of the painting, Jesus is bowed under the weight of the cross. His mother, Mary, looks into his face and she is supported on the shoulder by the hand of Mary Magdalene. Behind her is the face of Veronica (from the Catholic tradition) holding the cloth to wipe Jesus' face. Simon of Cyrene (with the stripped head-dress) helps with the cross, but so also does a woman in light clothes whose child is holding on to the back of her dress. There are soldiers, angry figures, cripples, and people of many ethnic groups in the crowd. In such paintings, Wesley sought to suggest the range of humanity, young and old, and the range of reactions to Jesus. (A similar range of people, a woman as well as the men, is depicted in the reactions to the woman taken in adultery, while the "sinful" woman is suggested only by her shadow. [No.1]) Wesley held the understanding that when people look at paintings they often associate themselves or others they know with the figures depicted.

The Pool of Bethesda (No. 15) is a crowd scene inspired by the story of a healing in John 5:2ff (at the Pool of Bethesda/ Bethesda/ Bethzatha in Jerusalem). Crowds are made up of individuals, representing the people of various ethnic groups from across the world. The groups of people with many illnesses and representing many nationalities, are placed to the left and the bottom right of the painting. They are dark in contrast to the bright colours and light tones of the central part of the painting. The face of Jesus is seen emerging from the crowd, looking at the thin man who is below him and apart from the group. The line of the gaze is from Jesus to the man. Many of the figures in the crowd are depicted as emerging from the bright background in the style of the "double entendre." This work contains an unusual combination of Wesley's carefully drawn figurative work and areas of almost abstract shapes and colour, with also a strong contrast of dark and light.

Several of the large watercolours comprise figures and symbolic shapes with layers of meaning. *Peter's Vision* (No. 3, Wray, p.109) shows the back of the central figure of Peter whose dream, the net with clean and unclean animals, is suggested at the top of the painting. He is shown as leaving to one side the traditional Jews and moving towards the house of the Roman centurion, Cornelius. *Palm Sunday* (No. 8) is a pattern of leaves through which the finely moulded face of Christ is glimpsed. The silk material base of the painting, *The Rich Young Ruler*, also presents the fine cloth of the rich young ruler's garments (No. 2, Wray, p.207). *The Black Madonna* (No. 9) painting presents her as an Indian woman seated on the floor, with the glowing red border of her sari shining in the dark. We have here a careful mastery of style and medium with a subtle interpretation of story with all its symbolic dimensions. A miniature such as *Noah* (No. 5, Fig.6, Wray, p. 170) is a simple statement of designed grace yet containing carefully thought and placed detail.

Frank Wesley's work is the result of an accomplished technique, careful thought, traditional insights broadened by international experience, controlled emotion with a wide understanding of human life, and deep reflection on how this understanding emerges from the pages of the Bible but overflows in wide-ranging human experience.

Geraldine Wheeler, August, 2004



Frank Wesley at Work

Works in the exhibition

Watercolours

1. *The Woman Taken in Adultery* (102 x 62 cms.) 1984
2. *The Rich Young Ruler* (61 x 36 cms. on silk) 1989
3. *Peter's Vision* (76 x 46 cms.) 1977
4. *Hagar* (48 x 29 cms.) 1978
5. *Noah* (18 x 13 cms.) 1980's
6. *Ruth and Naomi* (75 x 85 cms.) early 1940's
7. *Daniel in the Lions' Cave* (41 x 52 cms.) 1984
8. *Palm Sunday* (83.5 x 77 cms.) 1977
9. *The Black Madonna* (48.5 x 47.5 cms.) 1981
10. *Before Abraham was I am* (34 x 20 cms.) 1949
11. *St. Francis* (44 x 31 cms.) 1968
12. *Leaving Moab (Ruth, Naomi and Orpah)* (6 x 8.5 cms.) 1994
13. *Light Shines in the Darkness* (13.5 x 13.5) 1996

Oils

14. *Were you there?* (91 x 244 cms.) 1979
15. *The Pool of Bethesda* (117 x 190 cms.) 1975

Miniatures in egg tempera

16. *Annunciation* (23 x 15 cms.) 1962
17. *Visitation* (23 x 15 cms.) 1962
18. *Journey to Bethlehem* (23 x 15 cms.) 1962
19. *Nativity* (23 x 15 cms.) 1962

- 20. *Presentation* (15 x 23 cms.) 1962
- 21. *Flight into Egypt* (15 x 15 cms.) 1962
- 22. *Rest on the Flight* (23 x 15 cms.) 1962
- 23. *Home in Nazareth* (15 x 23 cms.) 1962
- 24. *Mary goes to Visit Elizabeth* (20 x 25 cms.) 1978

Woodblock Prints (1950's)

- 25. *The Forgiving Father* (117 x 52 cms.) printed 1998
- 26. *Miracle at Cana* (55 x 25.5 cms.) printed 1990
- 27. *Magdalene* (34 x 37 cms.) printed 1990



MEDITATIONS ON FRANK WESLEY'S

FORGIVING FATHER

LINDSAY FARRELL

The power of unconditional love is expressed in the story of the father who waits for his son to return. The narrative does not recall how long the father waited, but we are told that while the son was a long way from home, the father went through the village and despite of his disapproving family, embraced his son. In Wesley's picture we see an embrace that was costly and humiliating for the father. What drives a father to such reckless love? Henri Nouwen (1994), wrote in response to Rembrandt's masterpiece *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, "Here is the mystery of life unveiled. I am loved so much that I am left free to leave home...But the Father is always looking for me with outstretched arms to receive me back and whisper again in my ear: You are my Beloved, and you my favour rests." At the heart of the Christian story is the image of the unconditional love of God, expressed in the costly love of the sacrifice of Christ. As a father I need to be inspired by that unconditional love in my own life so that I can express it to my sons.

Second, Wesley's picture reminds me of the power of belonging. In stark contrast to his naked emaciated son, the father is robed in a luxurious garment and wears an expensive ring on his right hand. Later in the story, the father gives this ring, a robe and a reception banquet. This image



reminds me that, fundamentally, the son needed one thing that money could not buy. He needed to belong again. Our generation in the Western, one-third world is said to be the wealthiest generation ever. The paradox is that, in spite of our belongings, we may suffer from a sense of “not belonging.” Blatant as well as subtle marketing brings the promise of belonging through success, status and possession. Henri Nouwen left a stellar academic career at Yale and Harvard to live in the L'Arche community of disabled people. Nouwen was assigned Adam to care for. He was a person who could not speak, clothe or eat by himself. He was in Nouwen's view a young man who was considered by many a vegetable, a useless person who should not have been born. The great surprise for Nouwen was that he began to see that he, not Adam, was the chief beneficiary to this strange, miss-fitted relationship. Nouwen (1994) wrote, “what makes us human is not our mind but our heart, not our ability to think but our ability to love...belonging...receiving and giving love.” Fathers and sons need to engage in a quest to belong. Wesley's image of the father embracing the son is a unity of form and spirit. They meld together yet remain two people. Here identity and unity are gentle reminders of what it is to belong.

Third, this picture reminds me of the power of forgiveness. The father's forgiveness of his son is the focus of the picture. Rather than call his work *The Return of the Prodigal*, Wesley titled it *The Forgiving Father*. So many father and son relationships are based on mutual performance-based

ntly, Australian Catholic University National Gallery
nyo, Queensland Australia, presented a retrospective exhibition of
ous art by Indian artist, Frank Wesley. His work is well known
ustralia, India, Japan and the United States. Frank was born
know, India, and spent his life painting religious art. He painted
ry first UNICEF Christmas card in 1947 and was so highly regarded
artist that he was chosen to design the urn for Gandhi's ashes. In
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atican, with *Mary Magdalene Washing the Feet of Jesus* winning the
KII Silver Medal.

f Wesley's famous images in the Australian Catholic University
ition was the life-size woodblock print, *The Forgiving Father*, based
e well-known story Jesus told of the lost son. Frank represents the
ent in the story when the son who, after rejecting his father's love,
s home emaciated and broken. The forgiving father embraces his

y's *The Forgiving Father* reminds me about relationships between
s and sons. As a father of three adult sons (and one daughter), I
fy with the complexity in relationships expressed in this picture.

a picture to meditate on these complexities is an important way
hese issues and reminds me of some universal truths about
onships between fathers and sons.

the picture reminds me of the power of unconditional love. What
this well-worn phrase "unconditional love" mean in real life? One
mysteries of fathering is that no father can demand the love of his
Relationships between fathers and sons can fracture, as in the
le.

approval. Rather than focus on the achievements or failure
my children I need to be 'the forgiving father'. My failures
father provide opportunities for God's grace to be shown
Nouwen writes, "Receiving God's forgiveness requires a
willingness to let God do all the healing, restoring and
renewing. As long as I want to do even part of that myself
end up with partial solutions." As I meditated on the picture
became aware that the greatest gift that I can give my son
that of acceptance and forgiveness. This flows, not from
own human capacity, but from the mystery of God and my
experience of His mysterious forgiveness.

Saint Ignatius of Loyola prayed, *Lord... Give me only your
mercy, love and grace. With this I am rich enough, and I have
no more to ask.*

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