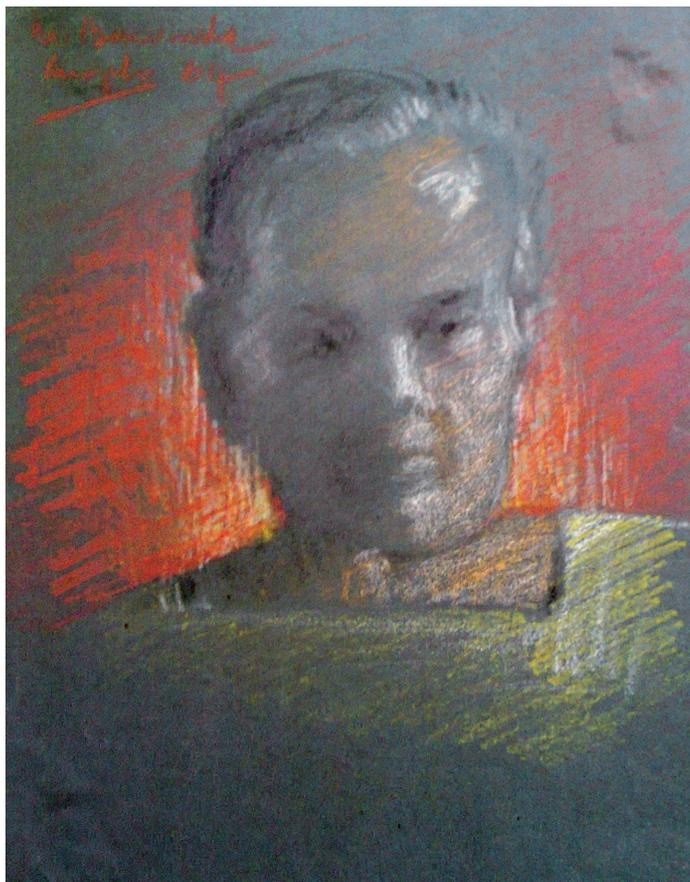




PORTRAIT OF AN ECLECTIC GENIUS

Angelo da Fonseca drew from diverse traditions to create art that was imbued with the spirit of syncretic India, finds Rupert Arrowsmith.



Angelo da Fonseca. *Self Portrait*. Soft pastel on paper. 1964. Collection of Ivy da Fonseca, Pune, India.

Facing page: Angelo da Fonseca. *Nativity*. Manmade and natural pigments and gum arabic binder on wood panel. 1942. Collection of Ivy da Fonseca.

It is very telling that Angelo da Fonseca, the innovative Indo-Portuguese artist who died in 1967, has needed to wait until this year for his first ever inclusion in a survey of the Indian 20th century canon.¹ Fonseca attended both the key schools of early Indian Modernism – Bombay’s Sir J.J. School of Art and Santiniketan in Bengal – and developed a wide range of styles that flirted with global influences ranging from Japanese prints to German medievalism, producing during his lifetime a number of works of rare individuality and power. His paintings also sliced through religious boundaries, incorporating Hindu and Buddhist elements into ostensibly Christian scenes in a way that was so controversial in his native Goa that he was forced to flee following accusations of heresy. He would seem then, at least on paper, to have excellent credentials for standing among the best-known Indian artists of the past hundred years.

But the fact is that barely anyone has even seen a painting by Fonseca. The vast majority of them are in the custody of Jesuit institutions that seldom exhibit them, or when they do exhibit them, tend to leave out the most controversial and interesting paintings in favour of the Christmas-card like watercolours that the artist churned out at various times as bread-and-butter commissions. This has led to an impression of Fonseca among art historians as rather a provincial figure, of interest probably only to practising Christians. The artist’s intense in-

teractions with other traditions of sacred art in India have thus become obscure, and his most experimental and best work left largely in the dark.

It is time to look at Fonseca again, and to recognize him as a cosmopolitan artist fully at home within the eclectic, transcultural landscape of Indian Modernism.

Fonseca was born in 1902, the son of a wealthy landowner on the island of Santo Estevao on the Mandovi River, and when he moved to Bombay it was initially to study medicine. He was already a watercolorist of some talent, however, and rapidly dropped out in favour of the Sir J.J. School of Art, which he subsequently also deserted to make the long trek across the country to Santiniketan. Paintings of the period such as the *Two Musicians* of 1932 show the clear influence of his mentor at the latter establishment, Abanindranath Tagore. Like the Bengali master’s work, they are already noticeably globalized, employing wash painting methods derived from Japanese and Chinese art.² Their flattened perspective and a diagrammatic presentation of architecture pays homage to Rajput and Mughal miniatures, while the full-face (as opposed to profile) treatment of the women’s faces in this particular watercolour evoke more obviously the Renaissance tradition of Europe.

Fonseca returned to his birthplace with the idea of starting a renaissance of his own, but his new-found cosmopolitanism was greeted with suspicion by a Christian establishment far more conservative than that of today. Typical of the kinds of composition that got him into trouble was the great 1942 *Nativity*, which shows a sari-clad Madonna seated in the full padmasana, a key meditation posture both in yogic Hinduism and in Buddhist practice. She holds not a lily, the traditional Christian symbol of purity, but a white lotus, the emblem of the Hindu goddess Lakshmi and of the redemptive Buddhist deity Avalokitesvara. Because the lotus flower grows out of muddy and often polluted water without being sullied by it, it is of course symbolic in Hindu-Buddhist tradition of an ability to transcend the exigencies of physical existence. Interestingly, the poise and serenity of da Fonseca’s Virgin seems in like manner to stem less from the grace of heaven than from a profound meditative detachment.

Given the fraught historical relationship between Catholic Christianity and other religious traditions in Goa, it is hardly surprising that the priests felt threatened by such blurring of iconographic boundaries. The extension of intermittent Islamic control over the region from the mid-14th century had seen an onslaught of forced conversions within the Hindu and Buddhist populations, and the Portuguese colonists who came in their wake followed suit.³ Unlike the Moslems, however, the Portuguese selected their converts mainly from among the Hindu ruling castes, as J.A. Rubinoff’s interesting research has shown.⁴ It was a strategy that allowed them to establish an entrenched local elite whose Christian identity strongly bolstered the hegemonic status of mores and customs imported from Europe, and whose adherence to the faith could be policed via terror organisations such as the Holy Inquisition.

Such experiments in social engineering could not but affect what was acceptable and what was not acceptable in Goan art, and by Fonseca’s time the norm in painting and sculpture had settled into a species of European Baroque kitsch. Fonseca

himself recalled with particular dismay seeing “machine-turned plaster statues, painted like a picture on a chocolate box, which very often, after a fall, become armless and have their head stuck back in place with red sealing wax.”⁵ He could not understand why Christian art, unlike that of Islam, had found it so difficult to successfully attune itself to the existing art traditions of India. “If the Mohammedan religion has been able to adapt itself so well to the country in its artistic expression of cult,” he wrote in an essay that was never published in his lifetime, “why not Catholicism too?”⁶

Bailon de Sa, an author from Fonseca’s home island of Santo Estevo, has recalled in a memoir that the main charge levelled against Fonseca by the local clergy was that his work represented a wholesale “Hinduization” of Catholic art. The worry was that any probing of common ground between Christianity and Hinduism might undermine the very social order of the colony, which was not to become part of independent India until 1961.⁷ For Fonseca, such attacks on his work were like a slap in the face. “Very severe criticisms, these,” he wrote later, “and most discouraging to a young artist who was hoping not only to create a new form of religious art, but also to build his future upon it.”⁸ To push ahead with his plans seemed futile, and he decided to relocate them three hundred miles away to Pune in Maharashtra, leaving Goa, in the words of his widow Ivy da Fonseca, “without informing anyone.”⁹

A quiet man given to introspection rather than sociability, it comes as no surprise that Fonseca gravitated in Pune towards an ashram conceived along vaguely similar lines to those of Santiniketan. This was the Christa Prema Seva Sangha, an experimental commune set up not by Catholics, but by Anglican Christians. Founded in 1922 by the eccentric English missionary Jack Winslow, an alumnus of Balliol College, Oxford, it was a place that complemented da Fonseca’s own attitudes towards spirituality to a tee. Santosh Salvi, the present-day manager of the ashram, recalls observing Fonseca painting on the terrace outside his small cell. “He was always completely silent,” he says. “Like a monk, dead to the world, concentrating only on his work. Sometimes he would turn and look at me and at the other people watching him paint, but he never spoke a word to us.”¹⁰

Winslow’s intention was that the site’s residents would “live together on terms of complete equality, sharing a simple Indian life of poverty and service, and offering to God a worship rich in the traditions of the East as well as the West.”¹¹ In practice, the values and practices of the place came extremely close to those of a Hindu ashram, and Winslow’s published writings on Christianity stress throughout the importance of devotional approaches that are derived overtly from indigenous Indian religions. For Winslow, establishing a personal relationship with the godhead possessed an importance far beyond upholding the liturgy or rituals of his own tradition, and the concept of bhakti – an intense and active love of the divine by the worshipper – became his most significant borrowing from Hinduism. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Winslow’s key mentor in India was the important bhakti poet Narayan Vaman Tilak, a convert from Hinduism who had established his own Christian ashram in nearby Ahmednagar a few years previously.¹² Fonseca also befriended Tilak during his time at Christa Prema Seva Sangha, and gradually allowed the con-

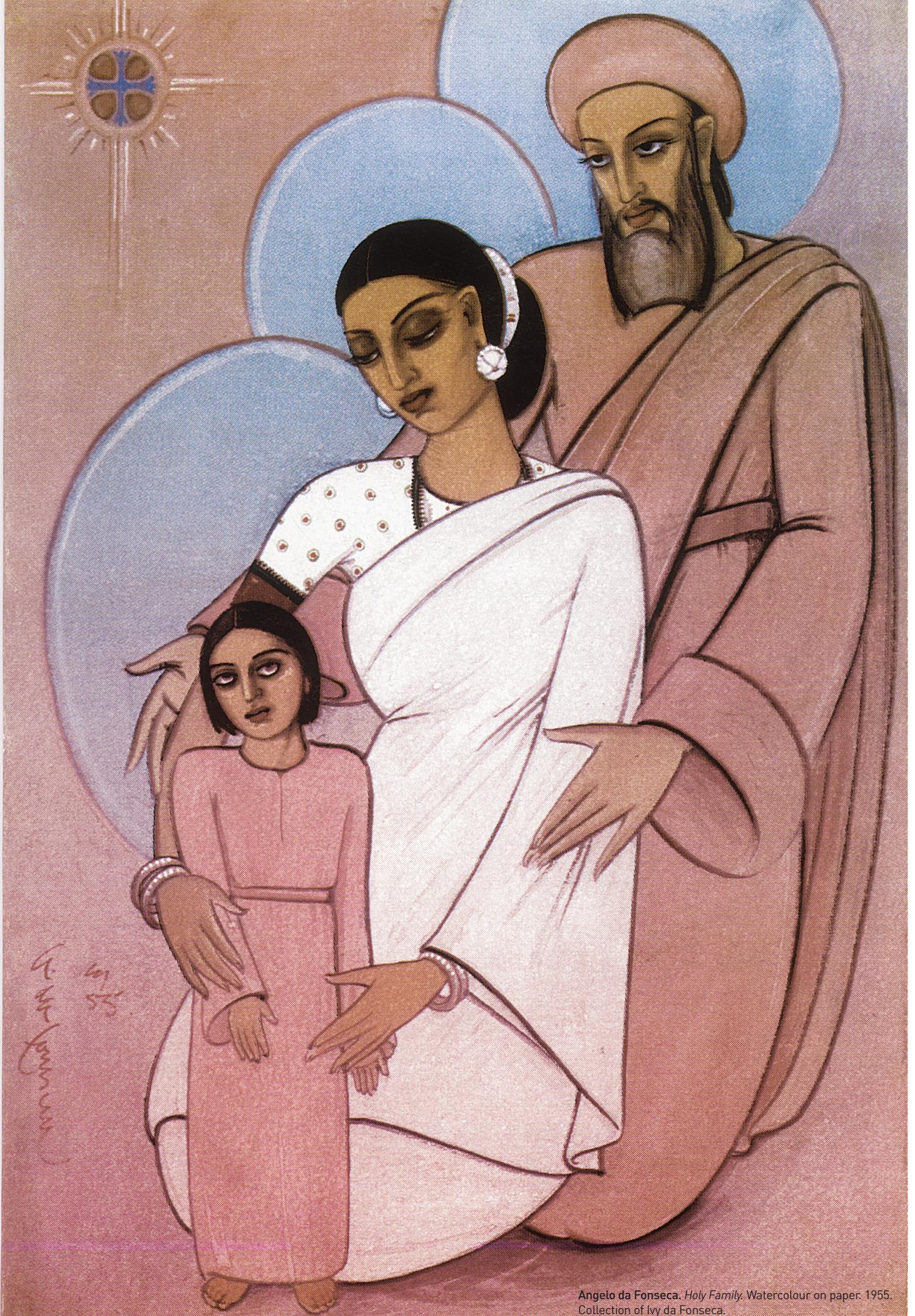
cept of bhakti to dominate his own thinking, not only about religion but about art as well. “Without bhakti,” he would later write, “India, whether she be Hindu, Mohammedan, or Christian, can never again build shrines like those of Sanchi, Ajanta, Elephanta, or Ellora.”¹³

Fonseca left several intricate murals on the walls at Christa Prema Seva Sangha, but regrettably the best of these, a large and colourful Annunciation scene, is now so badly damaged as to be beyond restoration. It is very similar in composition, however, to a monochromatic mural with the same motif that the artist painted in a niche at Pune’s De Nobili Jesuit College several years later, and one can get an idea of its probable content from an examination of this. The Annunciation represents the story in Christian mythology about God’s messenger, the Archangel Gabriel, appearing to the Virgin Mary to reveal that she is to bear the child Jesus Christ. It is one of the most popular of all the subject categories of European Christian painting. Traditionally, the Virgin is depicted seated on a wooden chair or the edge of a bed, reading or holding a leather-bound book. The angel is usually shown presenting her with a lily, which is, as has been mentioned above, the Christian symbol of purity. What is fascinating about Fonseca’s version is the transcultural spin he puts on every one of these conventions.

To begin with, the Virgin is not shown seated at all, but is kneeling on a woven mat that might even be a sajjada, the prayer rug used by Moslems to prevent the clothes becoming soiled during prostrations. Secondly, she is not holding a book, but reading from a palm-leaf manuscript of the type used prior to the turn of the 19th century in Southern and South-eastern Asia, particularly for the recording of Buddhist sutras. The lily again finds itself replaced by the white lotus of Avalokitesvara and Lakshmi, while the *nilavilakku* oil lamp and *kaitala* cymbals, both of which are used in puja ceremonies, hint at a further link between the Virgin and the Hindu goddess. The painting is in monochrome because Fonseca had begun to mix red earth from the banks of the Mandovi River near his home in Goa with Windsor and Newton gum arabic binder to create a unique medium that he used for mural commissions in various Pune locations throughout the ’40s and the ’50s.

By the time Fonseca painted the De Nobili *Annunciation*, he had married and moved out of Christa Prema Seva Sangha to a new apartment in what at that time was the heart of the city. He mainly resided at the college, which in those days was just outside Pune, during the period he was working on the frescoes. However, to spend time with his family, he would often make the journey of some three miles to his home by bicycle. It was a route that took him past some of the city’s most important Hindu temples, into and out of a Zoroastrian area, through the centre of the city’s Moslem quarter, and along the front of the grand synagogue built by the Baghdadi Jewish businessman David Sassoon in the 1860s. Retracing his route even today, it is not difficult to appreciate the ways in which daily exposure to the sights, the sounds and the atmospheres of such diverse neighbourhoods fed directly into his aesthetic consciousness.

Fonseca’s new wife, the young schoolteacher Ivy Menezes, was responsible for an important change in the artist’s approach

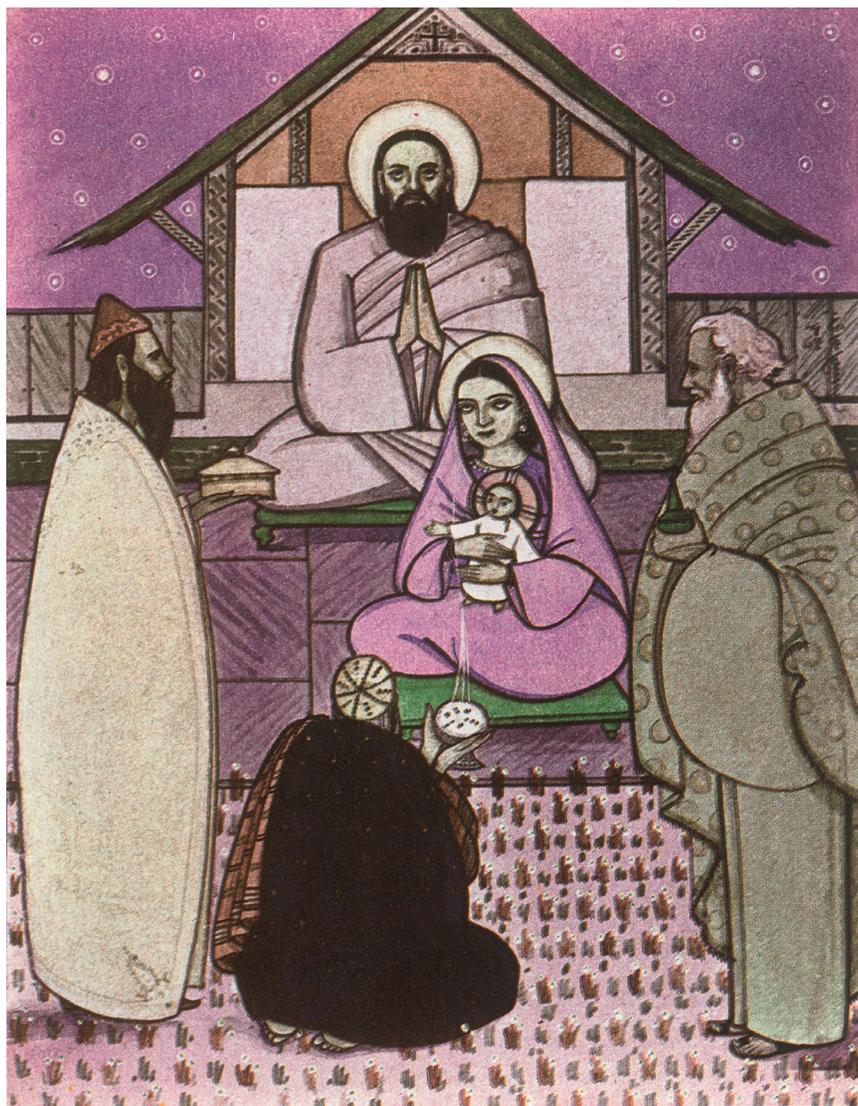


Angelo da Fonseca. *Holy Family*. Watercolour on paper. 1955. Collection of Ivy da Fonseca.

to his work. Eager after his experiences in Goa for any kind of recognition, Fonseca had been content during his early years in Pune to accept *ad hoc* commissioned work from religious organisations. Because (as is common) the subject matter and its presentation were normally specified in advance by the patron, such works of Fonseca's tended to suffer from overly didactic content and a style whose overriding hallmark is prettiness. Many examples of such commissions may be seen today in the collection of Mumbai's St. Xavier's College. Compared with experimental pieces such as the 1942 *Nativity* discussed above, they are bland for the most part, their subject matter often concerning the valorized exploits of various Jesuit celebrities in Asia. During the mid-1950s, Ivy began actively to discourage her husband from accepting further work of this type, urging him instead to work by himself and for himself in the creation of ever more personal experiments throughout the latter part of the decade and into the '60s.

The couple's only child Yessonda was named for the Braunschweig freemason Louis Spohr's 1822 opera *Jessonda*, a composition that da Fonseca had doubtless heard about from the relatively liberal friars of De Nobili, who mainly hailed from Germany. Spohr had adapted the piece from Antoine-Marin Lemierre's *La veuve de Malabar*, a novel about a fictitious love match between a Hindu princess and the 16th century Portuguese explorer Tristao da Cunha that he had read in Paris a year previously.¹⁴ Even in matters such as the naming of his children, then, da Fonseca was keen to encourage a dynamic merging of cultures. Given the reaction he had encountered in Goa against exactly these elements of his work, he may even have been moved by the performance history of the opera in Germany, for it had been banned by Adolf Hitler in 1933 because it was thought to encourage liaisons between members of different racial groups.

His wife and daughter represented concrete ties to humanity that the semi-reclusive Fonseca, a natural loner, had never before experienced. The religious works of the '50s now began to lose their stiffness, and to take on a more intimate air, no doubt due to the fact that Ivy and Yessonda now modelled for depictions of Mary and Jesus, with da Fonseca's own self-portrait serving often for the face of Joseph. Many works of an overtly secular character also began to appear, most of them loose pastel drawings whose dynamism is startling when they are placed next to the meticulously controlled execution of the Biblical paintings. A good example is the little sketch of Yessonda shifting her feet restlessly while looking out of the window of the family apartment at the bustling street below. Painted in the summer of 1967 just a few months before da Fonseca died during the meningitis epidemic that was then sweeping India, this swift capture of a frozen moment with its instinctive handling of pastel colour reminds one insistently of Degas in the 1870s.



Angelo da Fonseca. *Sarvapuujaya Namah*. Undated. Image courtesy Ivy da Fonseca.

Facing Page: Angelo da Fonseca. *Madonna and Child*. 1954. Image courtesy Ivy da Fonseca.



Angelo da Fonseca. *Annunciation*. Mandovi river mud and gum Arabic binder on plaster. De Nobili College, Pune. 1957. Image courtesy the writer.



Late period religious paintings such as the 1963 *Mother and Child* evidence a more obviously experimental approach to materials, and a new interest in formal abstraction. The Virgin's standard-issue halo has been replaced with the double mandorla of Buddhist monastic painting, with which Fonseca was very familiar from his many expeditions to the Ajanta caves. The burning oil of the lamp on the floor serves to remind the viewer that such mandorlas were originally conceived by Buddhist artists as auras of flame rather than light. However, for a change the religious ramifications of this element of the composition take a definite back seat to its pleasing double-oval geometry, which is playfully echoed in the Virgin's trunk and legs, in the shape of the sleeping infant, and in the stylized flame and body of the lamp. The piece is executed on wood rather than paper, but its glossy, gum Arabic surface makes it resemble a work in acrylics, adding to its overall atmosphere of modernity.

With regard to technique, the *Morning Star* of 1967 shows further evidence of the renewed period of experimentation that Fonseca was entering. It combines hand-crushed pigments in gum arabic with shallow, sunk-relief wood carving to produce a unique tension between incised and painted detail, between flatness and three-dimensionality. Sunk-relief carving is unusual both in Indian and in European visual art, and the approach to it used by Fonseca resembles the techniques used to create Japanese woodblock prints more closely than it does anything else. Santiniketan at the time of Fonseca's sojourn was a magnet for Japanese artists, largely due to the seminal visits of the great art historian Okakura Kakuzo at the dawn of the 20th century, and Ivy da Fonseca has recalled her husband speaking of them to her. This, combined with the fact that Fonseca's own art collection contains two Japanese prints, certainly testifies to some sort of Japanese connection.

Fonseca's Japanese prints are by Kawase Hasui (1883-1957), a member of the Impressionist-influenced shin hanga school, whose works have never been much appreciated in the West because they seemed somehow less 'authentic' than the productions of printmakers less influenced by other global cultures. Such judgments ignore the obvious paradox that French Impressionism was itself an unstable hotpotch of concepts borrowed in equal quantities from Western and Japanese art, and Hasui's works did not receive an equivalent dismissal in his country. We may be practically certain, then, that the works by Hasui that are in Fonseca's collection arrived there via a Japanese traveller.

Despite the increasing detachment of many of his late works from religious doctrine, da Fonseca was becoming increasingly concerned during the final months of his life at the fraught relationships between India's various sacred traditions. Existing tensions had been inflamed by the outbreak of the Second Indo-Pakistani War, which sprang up over conflicting claims to Kashmir, and claimed the lives of almost seven thousand combatants during the spring and summer of 1965. Such worries for the future of the subcontinent seem to stand at the heart of the *Morning Star* and also of the *Apocalypse*, which is arguably Fonseca's most powerful painting.

Never once put on public exhibition, the *Apocalypse* has been viewed only by a tiny number of visitors to Ivy da Fonseca's home, and has been written about by no one. Most people

who do see the painting take it to be a straightforward illustration of the following passage from the Biblical book of revelation:

*And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars.*¹⁵

The same lines had been used during the early 19th century as the inspiration for a series of watercolours by the English artist William Blake, one of Fonseca's acknowledged influences, and the *Apocalypse* may well have been a response to these well-known works. While it clearly represents a starting point for Fonseca's painting, however, the Biblical excerpt is merely the topmost layer of a deliberate palimpsest of references to diverse religious traditions that is as intricate and complex as India's cultural history itself.

Just as in the *Nativity* and *Annunciation* paintings discussed above, for example, the female figure of the *Apocalypse* may also be read as the goddess Lakshmi, this time in her role as the beautiful ascetic Vedavati from the *Ramayana*. Molested by the multi-headed demon Ravana while meditating alone in the mountains, Vedavati bursts into flames amid a rain of flowers, vowing to return and destroy Ravana during her subsequent incarnation as Sita, the eponymous heroine of this best known of all Asian epics. At first sight it looks in Fonseca's treatment as though the woman is posed in a Christian attitude of prayer, but then one notes suddenly that her palms are not pressed together, but instead held at an angle to one another with their backs facing outwards and fingertips crossing. In Hindu-Buddhist iconography, this is immediately identifiable as the *vajrapradama mudra*, a conventional gesture of the hands that signifies unwavering determination.

Into the maelstrom of expressionistic fire opened up by the *Apocalypse*, the *Morning Star* projects a ray of hope. Created side by side with the *Apocalypse*, and quite possibly intended to hang above the larger painting as an over-panel, the strikingly serene image of a diaphanous angel with its decorative bracelets and anklets seems also to suggest Fonseca's favourite Buddhist icon, Avalokitesvara, the androgynous Bodhisattva of Compassion. As in very many depictions of this deity, the figure in Fonseca's painting has an asymmetrical face, with the left side unfocussed in a detached, transcendent attitude, and the right seeming to engage in active sympathy with the viewer's plight as a fallible, physical being in a world defined by desire, impermanence and suffering.¹⁶

On one level, then, Angelo da Fonseca's last two paintings are a reflection of the artist's fears during the late '60s for the future of India, but their combination of redemptive elements drawn from diverse sacred traditions make them finally works of great optimism that hint not at divisions between religions, but at the latent unity of all spiritual belief. Bhakti, da Fonseca thought, with its implied transcendence of religious incompatibilities, was the only concept capable of defusing the potentially devastating possibility of inter-ethnic conflict within the Subcontinent. "When bhakti is dead," he wrote, "India, from being the home of the world's religions, will become the storm-centre of the East."¹⁷



Angelo da Fonseca. *Yessonda at Window*. Soft pastel on paper. 1967. Collection of Ivy da Fonseca.



Angelo da Fonseca. *Apocalypse* (main panel). Manmade and natural pigment and Gum Arabic on wood panel. 1967. Collection of Ivy da Fonseca.

End-Notes

1. P. Mitter, P. Dave Mukherji, R. Balaram (Eds.), *Twentieth Century Indian Art*, Milan: Random House Inc., Forthcoming 2014.
2. For more information particularly on Japanese influences on Bengali Modernism, see R. Arrowsmith, "An Indian Renaissance and the Rise of Global Modernism", *The Burlington Magazine* 152, pp. 228-35, 2010.
3. Goa was annexed by the Bahmani Sultanate, a dynasty of Persian origin based in the Western Deccan, around 1350. Control of the region oscillated between this and the Hindu Vijayanagara Empire during the two centuries that followed, in the process of which a large number of Hindu and Buddhist temples were also destroyed. The final period of Islamic rule, under the Sultanate of Bijapur (an offshoot of the Bahmani Sultanate), lasted until the Portuguese invasion. See R.M. Eaton, *A social history of the Deccan, 1300-1761*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 59-77, 2005.
- Under the Portuguese themselves, contemporary records indicate that around seven hundred Hindu sites were demolished between 1546 and 1567 alone. See C.J. Borges, *Goa and Portugal: Their Cultural Links*, New Delhi: Concept Publishing Co., pp. 34-48, 1997.
4. J.A. Rubinoff, "The Casteing of Catholicism – Goan Responses to Conversion" in N.K. Wagle and G. Coehlo, *Goa - Continuity and Change*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 165-81, 1995.
5. A. da Fonseca, "Indo-Christian Art in Painting and Statuary" in *Indica*, pp. 139-40, 1953.
6. A. da Fonseca, Untitled typescript, n.d. (but probably after 1952), collection of Ivy da Fonseca, Pune, India. A version of the text has been published under the title "An Approach to the Understanding of Christian Art in India" in *Euntes Docete* 7, November 2002, pp. 23-28, 2002.
7. B. de Sa, "Angelo da Fonseca: A Pioneer of Indian Christian Art" *The Examiner*, 30th November 2002, p. 12, 2002.
8. A. da Fonseca, *Op. Cit.*, p. 2.
9. I. da Fonseca, letter to the author, 29th December 2012.
10. S. Salvi in conversation with the author, 1st October 2011.
11. J. C. Winslow, *A Testament of Thanksgiving: a Memoir*, London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., p. 36, 1974.
12. J. C. Winslow, *Narayan Vaman Tilak*, Calcutta: Association Press, *passim*, 1923.
13. A. da Fonseca, *Op. Cit.*, p. 3.
14. C. Brown, "Spohr's Jessonda", *The Musical Times* 121/1644, pp. 94-97, 1980.
15. Revelation 12:3, Authorized *Oxford King James Bible*, 1769.
16. For further information on asymmetry in Bodhisattva faces, see R. Arrowsmith, "Spring Pictures", *The Times Literary Supplement*, 2nd September 2011, pp. 18-19, 2011.
17. A. da Fonseca, *Op. Cit.*, p. 3.