

FAITH

## The motif of devotion



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**Reverend Father AJ Thamburaj, SJ, uses imagery from Hinduism and Buddhism to express Christian ideas in his art**

Woven into the rich fabric of India's heritage is a small tapestry of Christian art that expresses its devotion through native motifs. For Reverend Father A J Thamburaj, SJ, former Rector (1983-'89) and Principal (1995-'97) of Loyola College, Chennai, whose works were featured in a two-day exhibition at St Joseph's College this week, art has been a driving force behind his religious calling.

"I'm not interested in selling my paintings; I do it only for pleasure and to express myself. But I do want art education to become compulsory for Indian children," says the Jesuit clergyman, who has been based in Tiruchi since 2015. "Youngsters in India today, irrespective of their religion, should be able to identify the art of all the communities, to become better human beings."

Fr Thamburaj, who has held solo exhibitions abroad and in India, uses imagery from Hinduism and Buddhism to express Christian ideas. His paintings look deceptively simple, as layers of meaning are built up through elements like colour choices and 'mudras' (hand gestures) taken from Indian performing arts that speak of the Self and the Divine through symbolism.

### **Early years**

Born in Palakkarai, Tiruchi on May 7, 1939, Fr Thamburaj has a Masters in English Literature. He did his theological studies at the Gregorian University in Rome and was ordained as priest there.

Interested in drawing from early childhood, the young Thamburaj decided to follow his heart after he won a prize for a drawing of Tamil poet Subramaniya Bharathiyar in an inter-school competition in Tiruchi at the age of 8.

He studied painting at the Ecole du Louvre in Paris and has worked under the guidance of eminent artists Henri Goetz (1909-1989) and Andre Bouler (1924-1997). He has diplomas in English Literature from London University and in Mass Communication from Rome.

"All my themes are Biblical because I am a preacher. But I have never had any conflict with the subject matter. I have studied all aspects of Art, but I always knew that this is what I wanted to draw," says Fr Thamburaj about his work.

Among his personal favourites, he lists Vincent Van Gogh, Amedeo Modigliani and Georges Roualt.

### **Visual communication**

Fr Thamburaj served the Loyola College in various capacities from 1973-1997. Besides working as Professor of English Literature for over 20 years, he started the Loyola Art Club in the 1970s, with a small group of students who would meet once a week to learn drawing and painting. This eventually led the college to offer the first-ever degree-level course in Visual Communication in India, in 1989.

"Today Visual Communication courses include Media Studies, photography and electronic news production, perhaps because these subjects are trendy and also can lead to lucrative jobs. But when we started, I was more focused on training students in art and sculpture," says Fr Thamburaj. The emphasis on digital mass media has been at the cost of aesthetic awareness, says the clergyman. "Everything that we see these days, whether it is a sunrise or a moonlit night, is experienced electronically, through a television screen," he says. "Children are slowly losing touch with Nature, and are unaware of the historical beauty that surrounds them. Our temples, for example, are among the best form of architectural art in the world. Artisans created their technology before they started constructing these magnificent structures. The mysteries of these people's innovations are still being revealed."

### **Spiritual subjects**

Busy travelling as a preacher these days, Fr Thamburaj prefers to use A4 size paper to create his paintings, because the sheets are easier to transport. "I used to love working with oil paint, but I've shifted to oil crayons and watercolour pencils because they don't need drying time," he says.

Fr Thamburaj has also written 27 books on spiritual subjects in Tamil and English, and was often in contact with Mother Teresa, who first visited Loyola College in 1979. "In 1993, she came to Loyola for a four-day prayer meeting that was attended by around 40,000 people. I'm a great admirer of her work. The most impressive thing for me about her was the *karuna* (compassion) that shone from her eyes for the poor and the needy. She was a unique person," says Fr Thamburaj.

He hopes to get school and college students in Tiruchi get interested in art in the coming years by conducting training sessions and competitions. “All children need is an opportunity to display their talent. It’s amazing what they can come up with,” he says.

When asked why he hasn’t tried other forms of artistic expression, such as sculpture, Fr Thamburaj throws up his hands. “I simply don’t know why my mind has resisted it for so long ... but you never know, perhaps there’s still time to learn new things.”

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