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By Simple Yet Propitious Means

The Art of Jorge Cocco Santangelo

Herman du Toit

Inspired devotional art always strives for essential meaning, communicating across the widest range of cultural boundaries. This kind of art has always resisted the vanities of idiosyncratic expression, striving instead to subordinate the artist's personal virtuosity to the sacral nature of its subject matter. There have been few artists of repute who have achieved this fine balance in their work. Jorge Cocco Santangelo, or "Cocco" as he is known, is one such artist who has devoted his professional career to the creation of art as an expression of his testimony of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. His work recently came to the attention of curators at the Church History Museum in Salt Lake City when he was given a purchase award for his painting *The Call* (fig. 1) in the Church's tenth triennial International Art Competition, *Tell Me the Stories of Jesus*, in 2015. This juried show has gained momentum over the years with participation by an increasing number of entrants from all over the world.

Cocco's award-winning painting depicts Christ's call to his first disciples Peter, Andrew, James, and John on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. This painting is noteworthy for its finely executed use of abstraction in its depiction of this well-known episode in the New Testament. In an unprecedented step, the Church History Museum subsequently extended a commission to Cocco for sixteen additional paintings on the mortal ministry of Christ. This commission is even more significant as it is the first time that such recognition has been given by the Church to a South American artist's work. This honor came after Cocco's extensive career in the fine arts and after an impressive exhibition history. His



FIGURE 1. *The Call*, 2015. Oil on canvas, 30" × 40". More images can be found at <https://jorgecocco.com>. Courtesy Church History Museum.

works of art have been acquired by collectors in various countries and exhibited in museums and galleries in Argentina, Mexico, Japan, Spain, Uruguay, and the United States. He has held more than fifty group exhibitions worldwide and more than thirty one-person exhibitions in North, Central, and South America, as well as in Europe and Asia. Some of these exhibitions were visited by Church leaders, including President Spencer W. Kimball, President Gordon B. Hinckley, and President Boyd K. Packer, as well as Elder Holland and Elder Christofferson. Cocco is also the recipient of fifteen national and international awards.

Cocco was born in 1936 in Concepción del Uruguay, Entre Rios, Argentina. He and his new bride, Myriam, became the first converts to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in his hometown in 1962 when they were baptized by Elders James Ogden and Noel Reynolds, the first missionaries in the area. The two missionaries had just crossed the river bordering Uruguay to teach the message of the

restored gospel in Argentina on the other side when they were directed to Cocco and Myriam's home. It was not long before both were baptized in the Uruguay River. When Cocco asked the missionaries where they should attend church on Sundays, they were directed to the missionaries' rented apartment, since there were no Church buildings in the area at the time. During these early pioneering days, Cocco served in many Church callings, including branch president and bishop (on three occasions), as well as in several stake presidencies. Remembering those early days of the Church in Argentina, he recalls, "The only calling I did not serve in was as Relief Society president!"¹

For Cocco, art and religion have always been deeply connected. He said, "Throughout history thousands of people have only come to know the stories of the Bible through architecture, stained glass windows, and sculpture."² As is often the case with many talented and accomplished artists, Cocco's career had both humble and early beginnings: "Even as a young boy I showed an artistic ability that I considered a gift that had been given to me long before. There was no art school in my hometown so I learned on my own, searching everything I could find about different styles of art."³

Immediately after his baptism, Cocco was filled with a desire to learn as much as he could about the history and culture of the ancient inhabitants of South America. He was particularly interested in the symbolism contained in the pre-Hispanic artifacts of the Olmec, Mayan, and Aztec peoples. His career as an artist gained momentum when he received an important award that enabled him to study art in Buenos Aires and participate in the art world more fully. He quickly embraced his career as an artist and educator, mastering various disciplines, including painting, sculpture, lithography, ceramics, and paper fiber art; however, painting would remain his preferred medium. Inspired by his new faith, Cocco embarked on multiple projects. He researched pre-Hispanic cultures in relation to the Book of Mormon and produced twenty panels that depicted ancient artifacts held in various museums. So also began his passion to depict the people and the places of the Book of Mormon. He declared, "Art is as effective as the spoken word

1. Jorge Cocco Santangelo, interview by Herman du Toit, BYU Museum of Art, March 1, 2016.

2. Jorge Cocco Santangelo, presentation at BYU Studies Academy Meeting, Salt Lake City, March 12, 2016.

3. Santangelo, presentation.

when it comes to conveying a message, and I use it as another way in reaching out to people to declare the truths of the Book of Mormon.”⁴

Cocco felt the need to learn as much as he could about the international art scene, so he traveled to Europe, where he lived first on the Mediterranean and then in the city of Valencia in Spain. While in Europe he mounted a traveling exhibition of twenty paintings entitled “Revelation,” depicting specific incidents of how God had communicated with his prophets from Adam right up to President Kimball, who was the President of the Church at the time. In addition to these figurative works, he also explored more abstract expressions in keeping with the modernist traditions of the day. Although he soon learned all that the work of modern masters such as Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), Georges Braque (1882–1963), Joan Miró (1893–1983), and Juan Gris (1887–1927) could teach him, he declared, “The root of my painting was always based in the gospel.”⁵

After seven years in Spain, Cocco decided to move to Mexico to continue his explorations of the art of the cultures of ancient America. Here he taught as a professor at the University of the Americas in Puebla while he continued making his own art, integrating much of the folklore, myths, and legends of these ancient peoples into his own paintings. On his return to Buenos Aires, he completed works that depicted major narratives from the Book of Mormon. Although these works were executed in a conventional representational style, his explorations into abstract art were beginning to bear fruit. The result was that his later paintings became more subjective, with more simplified abstract compositions, while maintaining the same dedication to his chosen subject matter.

As a lifelong student of the visual arts, Cocco explored numerous international styles of art and art making. As with many fine artists, he has been eclectic in availing himself of all the styles and influences that were valuable to him, experimenting widely with different art movements. Starting with naturalism and pictorial representation in his early years, he depicted simple landscapes and river scenes from his home town, as well as portrayals from the Book of Mormon. His stylistic trajectory took him from naturalism to impressionism, surrealism, symbolism, and finally to a style that he refers to as “post-cubism.”

4. Garrick Infanger, “Jorge Cocco Santangelo: Arte Sacro,” February 8, 2016, *The Krakens*, <http://www.thekrakens.com/2016/02/jorge-cocco-santangelo-arte-sacro/>.

5. Santangelo, interview.

His more recent work carries echoes of Braque's and Picasso's cubism, but instead of merely experimenting with the plastic modulation of spatial forms in relation to the flat surface of the canvas, his work is more directed. He draws the viewer's attention to specific symbolic interpretations contained by the interlocking planes of his compositions. He is not so much concerned with the superficial appearance and planar geometry of his compositions as he is with the aesthetic and spiritual experiences that these formal elements can evoke. Moreover, Cocco is less concerned with pictorial representation than with the symbolism of his abstractions. The very term "abstraction" implies a distillation of form and content, a paring down, or stripping away of superfluous elements in order to reveal essential meaning through a process of refinement and simplification. Leonardo da Vinci is reputed to have said, "Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication." Cocco has grasped this essential truth. He explained his approach as follows: "The lines, forms, and colors can express the meaning more directly—the idea being that viewers can enjoy an aesthetic experience that leads them into the subject matter. I try to maintain equilibrium between the figurative narrative and the abstract elements in my work."⁶

It is through this process of abstraction and simplification that he is able to present us with the refined essence of the narratives with which we are all familiar. It is also by this process that sacral events from Christ's ministry are reduced to their essential, almost iconic significance. He is not interested in the texture of a handwoven fabric or the look of a coat, but rather in capturing the sacred nature of the event in a timeless manner that would transcend boundaries of both time and space. According to Cocco, "Miracles and the plan of salvation are sometimes hard to comprehend in full, and may seem surreal to us. That is why I have decided to paint in this style, because those events represent more than the eye can perceive at first glance. Communicating the profundity of the event is more important than representing the details of clothing and surroundings."⁷

Cocco is also a colorist, the result of many years of dedicated study of hues, tones, and color relationships. The colors he uses are bold and expressive. His chromatic explorations emphasize the potential of fields of unblended color to harmonize with each other in a manner that speaks

6. Santangelo, presentation.

7. Santangelo, presentation.



FIGURE 2. *It Is Finished*, 2016. Oil on canvas, 30" × 40". Courtesy Church History Museum.



FIGURE 3. *Resurrection*, 2016. Oil on canvas, 30" × 40". Courtesy Church History Museum.

to our finer sensibilities. It is therefore not surprising that his paintings are brighter and more colorful than either Picasso's or Braque's analytical cubist works of the early 1800s. They are also more joyful. Cocco has dealt with subjects that have received little attention by other devotional artists, such as the moment that Christ declared, "It is finished" (John 19:30) and gave up his spirit (fig. 2). He has also depicted the moment of Christ's return to take up his body in the tomb after his crucifixion (fig. 3). Cocco recently said: "I believe that the paintings of Gethsemane, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection are the nucleus of the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ—without a vision of these things, Christianity would not make sense."⁸

It could be said that Cocco's use of planar simplification in his compositions also denotes guilelessness and freedom from duplicity. His

8. Santangelo, presentation.

most recent work, *The Call*, communicates in a straightforward manner that is more amenable to universal understanding. Cocco's fine abstractions achieve these ends. His painting is above all a manifestation of his abiding testimony and contributes a welcome and refreshing new perspective to the genre.

Herman du Toit is the former head of audience education and research at the Brigham Young University Museum of Art in Provo, Utah. He has enjoyed an extensive career as an art educator, curator, administrator, critic, and author, both locally and abroad. He was director (dean) of the school of fine arts at the former Durban Technical Institute in South Africa and holds postgraduate degrees in art history, studio art, and sociology of education from the former University of Natal. While at BYU, he was awarded a J. Paul Getty Fellowship for his PhD study of the finest interpretive practices at some of America's leading art museums.



The Baptism, 2016. Oil on canvas, 30" × 40". Courtesy Church History Museum.



The Sermon on the Mount, 2016. Oil on canvas, 30" × 40". Courtesy Church History Museum.



Peace, Be Still (The Tempest), 2016. Oil on canvas, 30" × 40". Courtesy Church History Museum.



The Gadarene, 2016. Oil on canvas, 30" × 40". Courtesy Church History Museum.



The Hem of His Garment, 2016. Oil on canvas, 30" × 40". Courtesy Church History Museum.



The Daughter of Jairus, 2016. Oil on canvas, 30" × 40". Courtesy Church History Museum.



Your Faith Has Made You Whole, 2016. Oil on canvas, 30" × 40". Courtesy Church History Museum.



The Ordination of Apostles, 2016. Oil on canvas, 30" × 40". Courtesy Church History Museum.



Feed Them, 2016. Oil on canvas, 30" × 40". Courtesy Church History Museum.



Go and Do Likewise (The Parable of the Good Samaritan), 2016. Oil on canvas, 36" × 48". Courtesy Church History Museum.



Lazarus, Come Forth. 2016. Oil on canvas, 30" × 40". Courtesy Church History Museum.



The Last Supper. 2016. Oil on canvas, 30" × 40". Courtesy Church History Museum.



Gethsemane (Jesus Is My Light), 2016. Oil on canvas, 30" × 40". Courtesy Church History Museum.



Cast the Net and Ye Shall Find, 2016. Oil on canvas, 30" × 40". Courtesy Church History Museum.



The First Vision. (This Is My Belovd Son. Hear Him!), 2016. Oil on canvas, 24" × 30". Courtesy Church History Museum.