

Walker Art Center, the Storm King Art Center and Microsoft have acquired pieces, and the ambition and adventurousness of her art continue to escalate.

An exhibition of five recent works, on view through May 5 at the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, N.Y., is aptly titled "Ursula von Rydingsvard: On an Epic Scale." Later this year, "Katul-Katul," her first public-art commission, will be installed in the Queens Family Courthouse in Jamaica, Queens. The sculpture is so enormous that she has never seen it whole: her studio, a 4,000-square-foot loft in Brooklyn, is too small to hold it.

"Because Ms. von Rydingsvard is known for immense undertakings, she was ideal for the Neuberger's obdiding Theater Gallery. "The space is challenging, and holding it is difficult," said Dede Young, the museum's curator of modern and contemporary art. "The ceiling is 20 feet high, and it's a 5,000-square-foot box. It takes work look very small."

Last June Ms. Young invited Ms. von Rydingsvard to exhibit at the Neuberger because she thought the artist could handle the physical space. Ms. Young originally envisioned a show of sculptures executed over the last two or three years. But after visiting the gallery, Ms. von Rydingsvard decided to create works to suit its dimensions.

Ivis Berman last wrote for Arts & Leisure about the collector, designer and writer W. Graham Robertson.

title comes from a tossing motion in a Polish children's

Ursula von Rydingsvard's huge sculptures somehow convey a sense of intimacy. In her view, 'gravitational pull' is everything.

game) fabricated in transparent plastic for the Queens County Courthouse. The final work — a semicircular dome from which two long ribbons will twist and trail like gargantuan jellyfish between two escalators — will be suspended in the cylindrical atrium of the building.

"Katul-Katul" is the first time since 1976 that Ms. von Rydingsvard has used a material other than milled cedar beams. Yet she has so absorbed wood as a primary medium that she had to think out the whole project in cedar, plotting a model of identical size — nearly four stories high — from the ground up, length by length, cut by cut, stack by stack. Only when the entire model of "Katul-Katul" was completed could she break it into smaller segments for vacuum-forming into light and airy plastic.

The commission was supposed to be unveiled and the courthouse opened last fall, but Sept. 11 made

emotions immediately come to mind, but this vessel of emotions" can also be an exposed maw or a cavern bristling with jagged contours.

For the Neuberger exhibition, Ms. von Rydingsvard ended up creating "Can't Eat Black," a visceral essay on the theme of dislocation. Chunks of the bowl were wrenched apart, reassembled at angles and pierced by steel rods. It is now a broken basin, a sagging, sprawling structure, rife with fissures, shims and mended seams that must be propped up by small columns. In contrast to the gliding, rippling rhythms of "Lace Collars" and "Krasawica II," the unstable surfaces of "Can't Eat Black" heave. The sculpture, which suggests a rupture in the earth, looks like rising and falling tectonic plates that will never be smoothly reunited. Indeed, after the piece is taken down, an exact reconstruction will be impossible. "The process records the doubt, the groping, the uncertainty," Ms. Rydingsvard said.

Ms. von Rydingsvard was born in Germany, one of seven children of Ukrainian and Polish parents named Karoliszyn, who had lived in rural Poland until they were removed to a large farm and forced to work for the Nazis. After World War II, the family was shuttled among refugee camps until 1950, when they emigrated to the United States and settled in Plainville, Conn.

After studying painting as an undergraduate in New Hampshire and Florida, Ms. von Rydingsvard entered the master of fine arts program at Columbia University, where she took up sculpture. With Ronald Bladen and George Sugarman as her teachers, it was natural that

MS. VON RYDINGSVARD'S sculptures, while brooding and somber, are oddly domestic and consoling. Although they are nonrepresentational and avoid literalism, they refer to household utensils, ancient landscapes and vernacular architecture. And when she speaks about incising and battering wood, Ms. von Rydingsvard's language is homely. She compares a jutting protuberance to an "apron" and calls a chopped, pitted interior "lacework." She revels in domestic analogies because, she said, it is her fabricated version of home. "I derive such comfort from the wearing down of surfaces," she said. "I love the look of stairs that have gotten walked on or tables that really get used."

Ms. von Rydingsvard would like to build and break another bowl. "Now I know it's O.K. to slice up a bowl," she said. "Before the Queens piece, it wouldn't occur to me to do that because it took a year to make. It will feel like a topographical map of a very primitive settlement."

And will it also be huge? "It has to be big," she replied. "If you tear a little thing apart, you can't even make what you're doing with that sculpture clear. There's no gravitational pull with an itty-bitty piece; you glue it back together, and who cares? But the gravitational pull of these monsters — to fight that is what interests me."

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Ruins of an Old Christian Church on Lao-Tzu's Turf

By LESLIE CAMHI

THE tranquil landscape surrounding a lonely stone pagoda some 50 miles from the city of Xian in northwestern China as inspired visionaries and rulers. According to legend, the founder of Taoism, ao-tzu, wrote his classic work, the Tao e Ching, during a single night's stay in e nearby hills before disappearing into ie west. More than 1,000 years later, in ie seventh century A.D., a Tang emper- erected a vast complex of Taoist mples on the site, calling them Lou uan Tai. And there, more recently, arlin Palmer, a British Sinologist and eologian, claims to have discovered e mains of the earliest Christian church China, dating back to the seventh ntury.

"It's rather like the Hari Krishnas sing allowed to build a temple on the eps of St. Patrick's Cathedral," Mr. almer said on the telephone from Manchester, Eng- nd, where he heads the Alliance of Religions and nservation, a nonprofit preservationist group. "It mediately changes our picture of the church in China. estern scholars had said that it was a heretical church,



Henry Ng/World Monuments Fund
Da Quin, a Tang Dynasty pagoda, in northwestern China.

that it had no impact on Chinese culture. And here we see that it was given an incredibly honored position."

Mr. Palmer has long been interested in this Church of the East, whose followers were concentrated in Persia and scattered across the ancient trading routes to China, from Baghdad to Samarkand. Little evidence of their existence survives. The Nestorian Stone, an eighth-century tablet in the Museum of Stone Inscriptions in Xian, tells the story of Christian missionaries arriving in the capital of Changan (now Xian) in A.D. 635 from present-day Afghanistan. And scrolls found in the caves of Dunhuang, on China's northwestern frontier, recount a version of the gospel in Chinese, melding Christian, Taoist and Buddhist imagery.

"The scrolls describe a church in which men and women were equal and slavery was forbidden," Mr. Palmer said. "Its version of the Ten Commandments instructed Christians in vegetarianism and forbade the taking of any life. It taught the Taoist notion of original goodness, rather than original sin, and it said the answer to karma and the fear of perpetual reincarnation is Christ."

While translating a collection of these documents for his book "The Jesus Sutras: Rediscovering the Lost Scrolls of Taoist Christianity," published last year by Ballantine Books, Mr. Palmer came across a faint map published by a Japanese scholar in the 1930's. It was

Did Taoists worship Christ? Was Jesus a Taoist? An old pagoda in remote China sews a Western thread into an Eastern pattern.

probably the work of spies posing as archaeologists while charting China's rural defenses in preparation for Japan's 1937 invasion. (In 1933, Chinese scholars also toured the ruins, but their findings were inconclusive.) The map listed no place names, but it marked a pagoda near the Lou Guan Tai temple, calling it "Da Qin," one of whose meanings is "from the Roman Empire."

"Imagine a church in the middle of rural England, called the Tang Dynasty Chinese Temple," Mr. Palmer said. "It's that much of an anomaly."

Mr. Palmer's suspicions regarding the building's Christian origin were heightened when, climbing a hill overlooking the pagoda, he realized that the entire site was laid out, not on the north-south axis traditional for Chinese temples, but rather facing east, as befits a proper Christian church. Local lore, in the person of a Buddhist nun said to be 115 years old, confirmed this interpretation. "Of course!" she exclaimed when told of his insight. "This was the most famous Christian monastery in China."

The monastery — only traces of which remain — was probably destroyed in 845 during a period of persecution begun by the Confucianists against foreign religions, including Buddhism and Christianity. Around 1300 the pagoda was converted into a Buddhist temple and

then was sealed in 1556, when damage from an earthquake caused it to lean perilously. The Chinese authorities, notified of the site's significance, immediately set about restoring it. When they reopened the building, they discovered a 10-foot-high mud, plaster and wood grotto on the second floor.

"It's a traditional Chinese scene of the five sacred mountains of Taoism," Mr. Palmer said. "And set right in the heart of it are the fragmentary remains of a nativity scene, with the Virgin Mary and Christ." On the third floor they found a six-foot-tall sculpture believed to represent Jonah lying outside Nineveh, and seventh-century graffiti carved into a brick by a homesick monk in Syriac, the liturgical language of the Church of the East (as Latin was for the Church of Rome).

The importance of these findings was underlined last March, when the Taliban destroyed the Great Buddhas of Bamiyan, two towering, 1,500-year-old statues carved into a cliff in Afghanistan that were priceless examples of Gandharan art, which combines Greek and Buddhist iconography. "The only other known place in the world where Western and Eastern artistic traditions met in antiquity and created joint works of art is in that pagoda in China," Mr. Palmer said.

Both places drew from the flourishing culture of the Silk Road, a mercantile network that linked Changan (then the largest city in the world), across the Gansu corridor in northwestern China and the ancient kingdoms of Central Asia, to Antioch and Byzantium. Art and artifacts in the exhibition "Monks and Merchants: Silk Road Treasures From Northwest China, Fourth to Seventh Century," organized in November by Annette Juliano and Judith Lerner at the Asia Society in New York, overlapped with the period of Da Qin's construc-

Continued on Page 47

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two years ago, coming up, a boom! "Trovatore," already in the can. And while the recent Philips recording of the Verdi Requiem, conducted by Valery Gergiev and featuring the bankable soprano Renée Fleming, cannot be classified as a vehicle for Mr. Bocelli, who is to say whether a major label would have undertaken the project without him?

Against huge obstacles and for meager gain, Mr. Bocelli has even entered the proverbial wolf's maw of the opera house. Massenet's "Werther" in Detroit, "La Bohème" in Cagliari, on Sardinia: Mr. Bocelli

For a considered perspective on the contemporary crossover phenomenon, a good source is Steven Mercurio, who, between "Wozzeck" and Mahler, has waved a stick for the Three Tenors, Mr. Bocelli and Mr. Safina.

"What do the Three Tenors and their followers have to do with opera?" Mr. Mercurio asked recently, echoing an interviewer's question.

"Not much," he said. "On a slightly superficial level, they have a lot to do with it. Think back to the 1950's, when Mario Lanza was making films like 'The Student Prince' and 'The

the similar claims now advanced for Mr. Bocelli and company either.

But ask Laurie Eckhout, a data processor recently turned on to opera. "I couldn't stand opera before I heard Bocelli," Ms. Eckhout said from her home in Juneau, Alaska. "He made me into a great opera fan. Now I've been to three operas at the Met, and they were wonderful. And I went to Los Angeles to hear Domingo sing Wagner with Gergiev, which really broadened my horizons. I watch operas on videotape. But I'm still very much a fan of Bocelli and Safina. I've only heard Safina sing

Christian Ruins in Taoist Country

Continued From Page 45

tion. "There was a synergy between religion and trade on the Silk Road," said Colin Mackenzie, associate director of the Asia Society, "that carried Buddhism, Zoroastrianism and Nestorian Christianity along its routes. Our exhibition told the story of how we think Chinese civilization was virtually transformed by these foreign influences."

The Da Qin monastery and pagoda have been added to the 2002 World Monuments Fund watch list of 100 most endangered sites, along with

the Ohel Rachel Synagogue in Shanghai, an early-20th-century building that served the city's swelling population of Jewish refugees from Europe during the 1930's. Henry Ng, executive vice president of the World Monuments Fund, said, "With all the discussions about religious tolerance in China, and Beijing's negotiations with the Vatican about opening up full diplomatic relations, it's very interesting to see these two foreign faiths coming to China at different points in its history, and finding a home there."

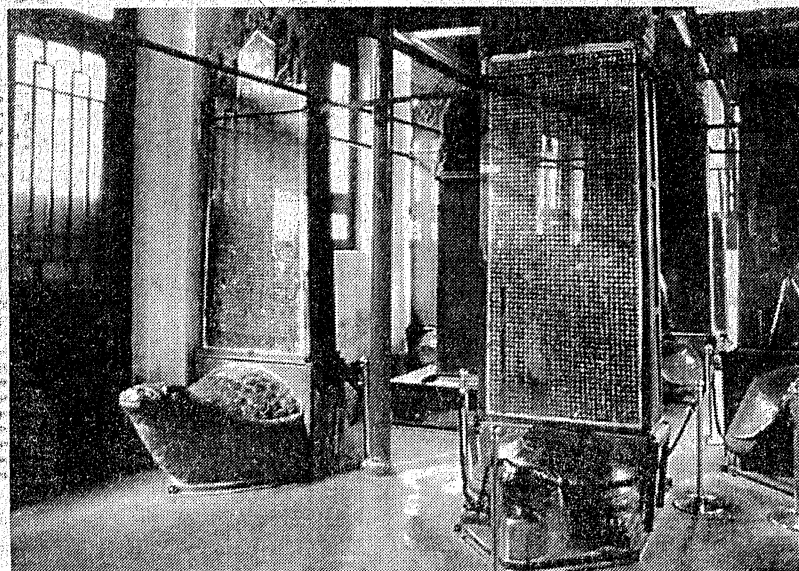
The Chinese response has been positive so far. The Chinese director

of the Da Qin project was the keynote speaker at a symposium on early Christianity in China, organized by the Chinese Academy of Social Science in Beijing in October, and several Chinese scholars plan to visit the site.

Working with the Chinese authorities, Mr. Palmer hopes to conduct more excavations and further restore the pagoda, the monastery and surrounding sites. He also plans to create a Museum of the West in China. "Just as, sadly, a lot of people in the West view China as a monolithic, totally foreign entity, so many Chinese feel the same way about the West," he said. "The purpose of the museum would be to challenge these views, to say the West has been in China for 1,400 years. It helped shape China and China helped shape the West."

Tim Barrett, a professor of East Asian History at the University of London, suggests that a growing need for alliances against the spectacular rise of Islam during the seventh century may have fostered Tang dynasty tolerance of Christianity. And since Lao-tzu was reportedly heading west when he disappeared, Professor Barrett said, "Taoists were perfectly willing to see any culture imported from the West, including Christianity, as a reflection of his teachings."

Such logic seems to find echoes today. Mr. Palmer has worked closely with the China-Taoist organization for many years. "They're fascinated by my findings," he said. "They wrote me that this confirms their suspicion that Jesus should be classified as a grand Taoist master." □



Xia Ju Xian/Circa Photo Library

The Nestorian Stone, an eighth-century tablet in the Museum of Stone Inscriptions in Xian, China, tells of the arrival of Christian missionaries.