

THE THOUSAND BUDDHAS OF THE TUN-HUANG CAVES.

BY

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In the spring of 1906, Sir Aurel Stein set forth on the second of his explorations of Central Asia. A little over a year later he arrived at Tun-huang, a hsien city not far from the border of north-west Kansu Province, purposing to visit the famous caves of the Thousand Buddhas, which are located a few miles to the south-east of the town. Before doing so, he learned of the existence of a store of Buddhist manuscripts which had been recently discovered in a walled-up section of one of the caves. Naturally he was eager for a sight of them, and took care, on visiting the site, to cultivate the Taoist bonze who was in charge of the treasure trove. Managing thus to gain entrance to the cave, he found a stupendous task—for there were thousands of manuscripts to be looked over. Only a cursory examination was possible, but presently something better than Buddhist classics in Chinese and Central Asian languages came to light, in the form of a series of Buddhist paintings, chiefly on silk, of the T'ang period, and evidently of the highest importance for the study of the history of Buddhist art. The bonze in charge fortunately prized the paintings less than the manuscripts, and by a judicious mixture of wheedling and of argument (in both of which Sir Aurel's Chinese assistant took a chief part), and of remuneration, almost the entire collection of paintings was acquired, together with a selection of manuscripts. Toilsomely the whole was transported through the deserts back to India, and later arrived safely in England, where it required seven years of labour in the British Museum to clean and remount the paintings alone; for they had been badly crushed in the long years of hiding, and only the extreme dryness of the climate had permitted the colours to remain at all. The

Elgin marbles were appropriated. The Peking astronomical instruments were looted, and as loot the guilty nation was compelled to return them; but the Tun-huang paintings and manuscripts were rescued from almost certain destruction and preserved with care; and now a selection of the artistically important paintings is reproduced, half of them in colour, for the use of students everywhere. Not having seen the originals, we cannot speak of the success of the reproduction by photography and three-colour process, but the attraction of the reproductions themselves is so great that we must believe they are as nearly successful as it was possible to be, and we can hardly be too thankful that at last, fifteen years after their discovery, they are available for all who are interested in Buddhist and East Asian art.

In his "Ruins of Desert Cathay," Sir Aurel gave a popular and personal account of his expedition, and in his "Serindia" appears his detailed report, in the production of which he is assisted by several experts. The present work was projected because of limitations, chiefly of size, in the detailed report, and is largely devoted to the exposition of the pictures from the artistic side; but so closely is this bound up with the archæological and iconographic sides which are treated more at length in the detailed report, that it is almost necessary to have a copy of "Serindia" for reference, if one is to get the full benefit of the work. But not only that; Sir Aurel presupposes in the reader an acquaintance with the principal work already done by students in this field, and without such an acquaintance it will hardly be possible to follow the explanations in many cases. In particular, one needs to have absorbed much of the results of the brilliant and interesting labour of M. Foucher, in his "Étude sur l'Iconographie Bouddhique de l'Inde" and his "Beginnings of Buddhist Art." For the student thus prepared the pictures take on added meaning at every turn. And it will be found, moreover, that a mastery of them, with Sir Aurel's text, will be of great assistance to the appreciation of the reproduction of the frescoes on the walls of the caves of the Thousand Buddhas; a work that is appearing now, as the result of the labours of the French expedition led by Professor Paul Pelliot, which was able to acquire many of the manuscripts and all of the paintings left by Sir Aurel, and to photograph the frescoes in the caves. The remainder of the manuscripts have been sent to Peking by official order, many being "lost" on the way. We can guess what might have happened to the paintings, if Peking had sent for them.

The introductory essay by Laurence Binyon discusses in illuminating fashion the art of the T'ang dynasty, and the artistic

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meaning of the Tun-huang paintings, and furnishes just the link needed between the work of M. Foucher, and the descriptive text of Sir Aurel. The former has prepared us to realize that strange marvel, that Greek models should be transmitted through the Buddhist art of ancient Gandhara, in north-west India, to China, so that Chinese artists should actually be influenced by Greek achievements, and wed their art to the art whose home is Athens. Surely it is not wholly due to religious considerations that they did so; surely they recognized beauty and took it to themselves for the very love of beauty. No religion is able to flourish long unless it cultivates the beautiful as well as the true and the good; and no more striking evidence of the right of Buddhism to the title of a world religion can be adduced than the fact that her devoted artists recognized the superb beauty of Greek models, and adopted them, while yet maintaining their own individuality, which marks even the most "Indian" of the Tun-huang paintings, and proves that Chinese artists were worthy of the goodly company of Greece and Gandhara. For even a tyro in art criticism can, with a little guidance, recognize the Greek touch, and distinguish the Chinese from the Gandharan style.

As one studies the pictures the sense grows within one of entering into the inner sanctuary of the religious consciousness of men whose feelings were sincere, delicate and broadly human. Indeed, it was a vivid, rich world in which the Buddhist of these paintings lived. If any one will first read the translation by Madame Chavannes in the present number of the *Review*, which deals with the Tun-huang region, and then study the paintings carefully, under Sir Aurel's guidance, he will get some idea of how the artists people the bleak desert with the kindly creatures of their imagination, as well as the terrible ones;—that desert which was still alive with the ghosts of those who gave their lives to the building of the Great Wall. These benevolent and beautiful and powerful and sometimes fantastic and frightful creatures and scenes from the Buddhist Scriptures were immortalized on silk, mocking the cruel winds and the savage forays, and giving colour and value to life. What a host is here of Buddhas, of Bodhisattvas great and small, and of their disciples, of Guardian Kings, and Garudas and demons, of dancers and musicians and souls new born into Paradise, of flowers and jewels and gorgeous apparel! Vigorous action and ineffable rest are alike represented, and the worshipper is bid to be of good cheer, for in the world to come is fullness of joy. Truly, the undevout student of Buddhist art must be mad.

Christian art has not yet made much impression in China. It is true that art itself as compared with what it was in the T'ang period is now either decadent or non-existent. But with the Chinese renaissance there is sure to be a new artistic period. The Christian church is taking account of the renaissance in other spheres, and she will do well not to neglect the possible influence of Christian art on the new China. It is an interesting fact to note, in this connection, that just as the earlier Chinese artists portrayed Gautama as though he were pure Chinese (in the scenes representing Jataka legends) so have native Christian artists treated the figure of Christ.

Coming now to the individual pictures and the description of them by Sir Aurel, we note that the identification of the figures was entrusted to a colleague, M. Raphael Petrucci, who in addition to an acquaintance with Buddhist art, was well grounded in sinology. Unhappily, M. Petrucci was not spared to complete his labours, and we have to mourn his loss, together with that of another collaborator, M. Chavannes. The description of the pictures suffers in consequence, and we hope that the *lacunae* can be made good in a future edition. A detailed examination of so rich a store is impossible in a review, but a few general remarks, together with a few details, may be in order. Of the subjects selected for representation, we note that Avalokitesvara appears most frequently, and there is as yet no suggestion that he is other than male. Indeed, in one of the paintings (Plate xvii) there appears the Indian goddess Hariti (in a position subordinate to Avalokitesvara), whom M. Foucher calls the Buddhist Madonna. One cannot but wonder what part she may have played in turning the Indian male god into the Chinese goddess of mercy, the truly Chinese Buddhist Madonna whom we know. It is a problem that still puzzles us; but just as the Tun-huang paintings have helped to clear up the question of the origins of the Buddhist art of Japan, so there may lie buried somewhere in this great land, waiting for the explorer's spade, the evidence that shall clear up the connection between Avalokitesvara and Kwan-yin. But the Bodhisattva who incarnates mercy is not alone; we find as well Ksitigarbha and the Buddhas Amitabha, Maitreya, and Bhaisajjaraja (otherwise Bhaisajyaguru), the King or the Sage of Medicine. The latter, of whom Eitel's *Handbook* appears to be quite innocent, and who is barely mentioned by Sir Charles Eliot, in his great work, is the chief subject of two of the finest paintings of all, represented in the first three plates. We recommend the careful study of these to any who desire a sympathetic understanding of the soul of Chinese Buddhism at its best

Mr. Binyon speaks warm words of appreciation, and he does not overstate the case.

Aside from Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, the vigorous figures of the Lokapalas, or Guardians of the Four Quarters, are favourites for treatment. They provide the proper foil to the dreamily restful spirits. It shows the essentially healthy character of the artists that they could perceive that men do not always wish to be "carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease." Of course this healthiness has its roots in the whole Mahayana revolt against the narrow ideals of the Hinayana teachings, but it draws fresh life from the vigour of the soul of the Chinese artist.

In the hope of sending the reader to drink at the fountain itself, we venture a brief description of one of the reproductions, the Paradise of Bhaisajyaguru, presented in Plates i and ii. The painting is in the Indian manner, somewhat crowded and lacking the fine spacing which the Chinese style employs. The Buddha sits in the center, flanked by the Bodhisattvas Manjusri and Samantabhadra (representing Wisdom and Power). These in turn are flanked by numerous minor Bodhisattvas, all distinguished by haloes, and by Guardian Kings and demons. On a platform below is a woman dancer, accompanied by eight musicians and two child dancers. Twelve Dharmapalas, Guardians of the Law, are disposed in the bottom corners. A Garuda (half bird, half woman) is just below the dancer's platform, and in the lotus lake are flowers supporting souls newborn. The colours are glowing and varied, but it is the variety of expression in the faces that deserves the most careful study. As Mr. Binyon says, "We are taken into an atmosphere of strange peace, which yet seems filled with buoyant motion, and floating strains of music."

We think that one of the pictures that will most repay study is Plate xvii, though artistically, it may not stand in the highest rank. The decorative effect is especially rich. Avalokitesvara appears in his eleven-headed, thousand-armed form, but the effect is not repulsive as it is so apt to be in a Chinese modern temple. The presence of the Indian deities Indra and Brahman is noteworthy. Below them appear two Sivaitic deities, but Sir Aurel has them in the wrong order in his description. The Chinese in the cartouches says quite plainly that it is Mahesvara 摩醯守羅 on the right (on Siva's bull) and Mahakaia 摩訶迦羅 on the left. The Chinese of the first title is somewhat unusual, for it does not appear in this form in the 佛學大辭典; the 摩 being there changed to 摩.

In this connection it may be as well to call attention to two other small errors in the descriptive text, both of them doubtless

due, as was the first, to absence of needed help from the sinological side. The first is in Plate xii which represents "Scenes from Gautama Buddha's Life." Of the first scene the text says, "We see the prince riding out of the green-tiled gateway of the battlemented courtyard of his father's palace," and of the second scene, "We see the prince riding with bent head from the same palace gateway." But the Chinese inscription in the cartouches reads, of the first scene, "The prince goes out of the east gate of the city" 太子出城東門; and of the second, "The prince goes out of the south gate of the city." 太子出城南門. In both cases a Chinese city wall is quite visible.

Again at the end of the description of Plate xx, we read, "The Chinese inscription in the left top corner describes the painting as the gift of a son in memory of his father." As a matter of fact, it is a daughter, and not a son, who makes the gift. One of the characters is a little blurred, but the whole is clear enough, and reads, "(From) the ninth daughter, in token of eternal service," 女弟子九娘永爲供養. These, however, are very tiny spots on the sun.

Among the uncoloured illustrations, one of the more interesting is Plate xvi. The combination and contrast of Indian and Chinese treatment is very marked, and a special opportunity for study rises from the fact that the figures of Avalokitesvara in the upper half are mainly Indian, while those of Samantabhadra and Manjusri in the lower half are mainly Chinese (witness also the legs of the elephant!). The pictures of the donors at the bottom bear a date, reminding us of the happy custom of the Chinese to be exact in these matters, as the Indian artists were not. In many of the pictures where no date is affixed, it is possible to guess it approximately from the style of dress worn by the donors. The two Bodhisattvas give respectively the "gesture" (derived from India, and more commonly preserved in Lama temples than in those purely Chinese) of argumentation, and of adoration. According to M. Foucher, there are nine "gestures"; they are like the leit-motifs in Wagner, perceptible signs for the conveyance of general ideas. One or another of these gestures appears in most of the pictures.

Plate xi contains the feature of souls as babes in lotus buds, floating on the lake of the Western Paradise and waiting for the buds to open, so that they may be born into the Paradise. Plates vi and vii represent the Paradise of the historical Buddha, Sakyamuni, and are full of the most attractive and absorbing detail. Plate xiv has special iconographic interest. It represents historic statues of Sakyamuni, known to have existed in various parts

of India ; in particular one which the Chinese pilgrim Hsūan Tsang saw at Bodh-gaya, the spot assigned by tradition as the scene of the historic Buddha's attainment of enlightenment.

Among the smaller plates, the most noteworthy is No. xxxiv, which reproduces on a scale of one-tenth only and so cannot do justice to the original ; it is a reduction of a large embroidery picture representing Sakyamuni on the Vulture Peak, and is one of the most important of the Tun-huang finds. It is wonderful to think of these colours, which glow as if in a Botticelli painting, surviving the chances of centuries, crushed in a dark cave under a heavy burden of paper, and now brought to the light and stitched by a skilful needlewoman on a new canvas backing, so that they may be preserved indefinitely. The principal subjects of the other small plates are Bhaisajyaguru, the Buddha legend, Ksitigarbha, Avalokitesvara, and the Lokapalas.

Our brief tale is told. We turn from a visit to this strange and beautiful world constructed from the materials of the faith once delivered to Buddhist saints, with feelings akin to those of Aeneas or Dante returning to the earth. We have been in fairy-land, and while we may not accept its details as authentic, its spirit lifts our spirits to a place where we breathe freely in a pure and bracing atmosphere. All this we owe to the intelligence, courage, patience and devotion of Sir Aurel Stein, and his colleagues great and small. *Finis coronat opus* ; the labour of the recovery of these treasures was worthy of the labour that produced them. Long may the gallant explorer live to receive the congratulations and thanks he so richly deserves, and to gain fresh laurels in his chosen field.

