

Aurel Sir Stein



*The Thousand
Buddhas*

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The Thousand Buddhas

**Ancient Buddhist Paintings from the Cave-Temples of
Tun-huang on the Western Frontier of China**



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PREFACE

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THE purpose of this publication is to place before students interested in Eastern art reproductions of select specimens from among the great collection of ancient Buddhist paintings which in the course of the explorations of my second Central-Asian journey, carried out in 1906-8 under the orders of the Government of India, I had the good fortune to recover from a walled-up chapel at the 'Caves of the Thousand Buddhas' near Tun-huang. The essential facts concerning their discovery will be found summarized in Mr. LAURENCE BINYON'S *Introductory Essay*. Those who may wish for details of the circumstances attending it, and for some account of the local conditions which explain the preservation of these relics of ancient Buddhist art in the distant region where the westernmost Marches of true China adjoin the great deserts of innermost Asia, will find them in my personal narrative of that expedition.¹ They have been recorded still more fully in *Serindia*, the final report on the results of my explorations, recently issued from the Oxford University Press.²

In Mr. Binyon's *Introductory Essay* there will be found a lucid exposition, by the hand of a competent expert, of the reasons which invest those paintings with special interest for the study of Buddhist art as transplanted from India through Central Asia to the Far East, and with great importance, too, for the history of Chinese art in general. There light is thrown also on the manifold problems raised by the variety of art influences from the West, the South,

and the East which are reflected in different groups of these paintings and which some of them show in striking intermixture.

But throughout it is Buddhist inspiration and legend, as propagated by the Mahāyāna system of Buddhism in Central and Eastern Asia, which furnish the themes of these paintings and determine the presentation of individual figures and scenes in them. For the proper appreciation of their art some knowledge of the traditional elements in subjects and treatment is indispensably needed. It has hence been my aim in the descriptive text referring to each Plate to supply such iconographic information as the non-specialist student may need for the comprehension of the subject and details, and as the present state of our researches permits to be safely offered. In the same descriptive notes I have endeavoured to record information also as to the state of preservation, character of workmanship, colouring, and similar points in each painting.

Having thus briefly indicated the object and scope of this publication, it still remains for me to give some account of the labours which had to precede it, and to record my grateful acknowledgement of the manifold help which alone rendered the realization of this long-cherished plan possible in the end. In Mr. Binyon's *Introductory Essay* reference has been made to the protracted and delicate operations which were needed at the British Museum before the hundreds of paintings, most of them on fine silk, which had lain, often crumpled up into tight little packets, for centuries under the crushing weight of masses of manuscript bundles, could all be safely opened out, cleaned, and made accessible for

examination. The far-reaching artistic interest of these pictures had already greatly impressed me when I first beheld them in their original place of deposit. But only as the work of preservation progressed did it become possible fully to realize the wealth and variety of all these materials, the novel problems they raised, and the extent and difficulties of the labours which their detailed study and interpretation would need.

The mixture of influences already referred to revealed itself plainly in features directly derived from Graeco-Buddhist art and in marks of the change it had undergone on its passage through Central Asia or Tibet. But the preponderance of Chinese taste and style was all the same unmistakable from the first. On the iconographic side, too, it soon became clear that the varied imagery displayed by the paintings, though based on Indian conceptions and forms, bore the impress of important changes undergone on its transition to China and after its adoption there. The chief hope of guidance for the interpretation of this Pantheon lay manifestly in comparison with the artistic creations of the later Mahāyāna Buddhism of the Far East, especially of Japan, and in the Chinese inscriptions displayed by many of the silk paintings. It was obvious hence that for this part of my collection a collaborator was needed who with knowledge of Buddhist iconography would combine the qualifications of a Sinologue as well as familiarity with Far-Eastern art in general.

Through Mr. Binyon's friendly intercession I was able in the autumn of 1911 and towards the close of my stay in England to secure this collaborator, and one exceptionally

qualified, in the person of M. RAPHAEL PETRUCCI. Already distinguished in more than one field of research, M. Petrucci combined enthusiastic devotion to Far-Eastern art as a critic, connoisseur, and collector, with Sinologue studies begun under such a master as M. Chavannes. A series of important publications on the art of China and Japan bears eloquent testimony to his eminent fitness for what was bound to prove a difficult task. During the following two years M. Petrucci devoted protracted labours to the study of our paintings and their inscriptions. The results were to be embodied in an extensive Appendix to *Serindia*, probably requiring a separate volume.

In 1913 he supplied me with the draft of his introductory chapter dealing with the votive inscriptions of our paintings, and after my start that year for a third Central-Asian expedition he discussed in a separate essay those elaborate compositions or 'Maṇḍalas' which form the subject of some of the largest and artistically most interesting of our paintings.³ In addition to the above M. Petrucci had collected a great mass of Chinese textual materials for the identification of Jātaka scenes, individual divinities, &c., represented in the paintings, when the invasion of Belgium cut him off from his home at Brussels and all his materials. Under the conditions created by the world war he was unable to resume his task in earnest. But he found occasion even then, in the midst of voluntarily undertaken medical duties under the Belgian Red Cross, to revisit our Collection, to assist with his expert advice in the cataloguing of the Tun-huang paintings, and to publish in the *Annales* of the

Musée Guimet a short but very instructive and stimulating *conférence* on them.⁴

When returning in May 1916 from my third Central-Asian expedition, I found M. Petrucci at Paris, still full of vigour and eagerly bent upon carrying through his task. When a few weeks afterwards I was able to inform him of the fortunate chance which, as will be explained presently, had offered to make select specimens of our Tun-huang paintings accessible in adequate reproductions to a wider circle of students of Far-Eastern art, he most willingly undertook to contribute the main portion of the text which was to accompany them. But some months later he began to suffer from an internal ailment, and though in the autumn of 1916 he was still strong enough to take a very helpful share in the selection of the paintings to be reproduced in *The Thousand Buddhas*, his condition became serious enough to necessitate a grave operation in February 1917. This he overcame with apparent success, only to succumb a week later to diphtheritis contracted in the hospital. Deprived thus by a cruel blow of Fate of a most valued collaborator and friend, we must rest content with dedicating to his memory this publication in which he was to have borne a principal share.

In accordance with the plan sanctioned in 1911 by the Secretary of State for India, the Detailed Report on the results of my second Central-Asian expedition was to include also a systematic survey and full descriptive list of all the art relics brought away from the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas. With this object in view I had taken care, at the same time when enlisting M. Petrucci's

collaboration, to use as many plates of *Serindia* as the claims of abundant 'finds' from other sites would allow, for the reproduction of characteristic specimens among the different classes of paintings, drawings, and wood-cuts recovered in the walled-up chapel.⁵ But it was clear from the first that the limitations imposed by the number and size of the *Serindia* plates, and even more perhaps by the cost of colour reproduction, would not allow adequate justice being done to the artistic, as distinguished from the iconographic and archaeological, value of the paintings. It was equally easy to foresee that, however numerous the small-scale reproductions in the plates of *Serindia* might be, and however thorough the description and analysis of the new materials in its text, the very character, bulk, and correspondingly high price of that detailed report would prevent it from making those paintings sufficiently accessible to students interested mainly in their art.

For these and cognate reasons I had been anxious from the outset to arrange for a separate publication like the present. But the attempts made in this direction before my return to duty in India at the close of 1911 failed from want of needful means, and subsequently distance and absorbing exertions in the field, as implied by my third Central-Asian expedition (1913-16), precluded their effective renewal. That auspices proved more favourable on my return from that journey was due mainly to the generous interest which a far-sighted statesman, the Right Honourable Mr. AUSTEN CHAMBERLAIN, then H.M. Secretary of State for India, was pleased to show in the plan. His appreciation of the importance of these pictorial treasures and of the need of

securing an adequate record of them before their impending division between the British Museum and Delhi was largely instrumental in inducing the authorities of the India Office, with the ready co-operation of the Trustees of the British Museum, to sanction the present publication at a cost not exceeding £1,900. Regard for the special difficulties then prevailing owing to the war is an additional reason for Mr. Chamberlain's timely help being remembered by me with profound gratitude.

The execution of the plates, both by three-colour and half-tone process, was entrusted to Messrs. HENRY STONE & SON, of Banbury, whose establishment, under the expert direction of Mr. J. A. MILNE, C.B.E., had already proved its special fitness for such work by producing the colour plates for my *Desert Cathay* and *Serindia*.⁶ I feel all the more grateful for the great skill and care bestowed by them upon the truthful rendering of the paintings, and for the success achieved, because I learned to know the considerable technical difficulties which had to be faced, particularly in the case of the colour plates. After my return to India in the autumn of 1917 Mr. BINYON kindly charged himself in my place with all the arrangements which were needed in connexion with the reproduction work.

It was under the constant and ever-watchful supervision of Mr. LAURENCE BINYON that the exacting labours needed for the safe treatment and future preservation of the Ch'ien-fong paintings, and extending over a period of close on seven years, had been effected in the Prints and Drawings Department of the British Museum. To his unfailing knowledge and care all students of these remains of

Buddhist art owe gratitude for the ease with which they can now be examined. But to those whom the present publication is intended to reach he has rendered a service equally great by contributing to it his *Introductory Essay*. The expert guidance it affords as regards the evolution of Buddhist pictorial art in the Far East and with regard to a variety of kindred questions helps appreciably to reduce the loss which *The Thousand Buddhas* has suffered through M. Petrucci's untimely death, and for that help I feel deeply beholden.

That lamented event left me with a heavier obligation than I had anticipated in regard to the text both of this publication and of the corresponding portion of *Serindia*. In meeting this obligation I realize fully the limitations of my competence. Though familiar with the iconography of Graeco-Buddhist art and of such remains of Buddhist art in Central Asia as I had the good fortune to bring to light myself, I had never found leisure for a systematic study of the religious art of the Far East or Tibet. There was enough in the archaeology of the sites I had explored through the whole length of the Tārīm Basin and along the westernmost Marches of China and in the geography and history of those wide regions fully to occupy my attention. In addition, my want of Sinologue qualifications made itself sadly felt.

Fortunately I had taken special care to secure a sufficiently detailed description of all pictorial remains during the years of my renewed absence in Central Asia and those immediately following. This Descriptive List, now comprised in *Serindia*,⁷ was prepared mainly by the hand of Miss F. M. G. LORIMER, whose painstaking scholarly work as

assistant at my British Museum collection has proved throughout a very valuable help. Besides M. Petrucci's interpretations there was embodied in it also much useful information received on artistic points from my friend and chief assistant Mr. F. H. ANDREWS, and on Chinese inscriptions from Dr. L. GILES and Mr. A. D. WALEY of the British Museum, as well as many helpful iconographic explanations kindly furnished by two Japanese experts, Professor TAKI and Mr. YABUKI. This Descriptive List made it possible for me to provide in *Serindia* a systematic review of all our pictorial relics from Tun-huang,⁸ and this in turn has greatly facilitated the preparation of the descriptive text for the present publication. For details which could not find mention in it reference to the chapters of *Serindia* already quoted will prove useful.

It only remains for me to add my grateful acknowledgements for the care which my friends Mr. F. H. Andrews, Mr. L. Binyon, and Mr. C. E. Freeman have been kind enough to bestow, whether on plates or on print, and to express the wish that the reception accorded to *The Thousand Buddhas* both in the West and the East may justify the hope which prompted the sacrifice incurred for their sake at a time of great strain and stress.

AUREL STEIN.

CAMP, MOHAND MARG,

KASHMIR.

JUNE 2, 1921.

¹ See *Ruins of Desert Cathay* (Macmillan & Co., London, 1912), ii. pp. 20-31, 163-234.

² See *Serindia* Detailed Report on explorations in Central Asia and Westernmost China, carried out and described under the orders of H.M. Indian Government by

Aurel Stein, K.C.I.E., Indian Archaeological Survey (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1921, vols. i-v, Royal 4to), pp. 791-825.

3 These contributions have since been printed in Appendix *E* of *Serindia*, pp. 1392-428, after having been carefully prepared for publication by M. Chavannes, with the assistance of common friends, MM. Foucher and Sylvain Lévi.

4 See Petrucci, *Les peintures bouddhiques de Touen-houang, Mission Stein* (Annales du Musée Guimet, Bibliothèque de vulgarisation, xli, 1916, pp. 115-40).

5 See Plates LVI-CIV in *Serindia*, vol. iv.

6 Seven of those in the latter work have, with the kind permission of the Delegates of the Clarendon Press, been used also here.

7 See *Serindia*, Chapter xxv, section ii, pp. 937-1088.

8 See *Serindia*, Chapter xxiii, sections i-ix, pp. 831-94.

THE TUN-HUANG PAINTINGS AND THEIR PLACE IN BUDDHIST ART

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AN INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

BY

LAURENCE BINYON

I

THE paintings and drawings here reproduced are a selection from the mass of precious material discovered by Sir Aurel Stein, and brought away by him from 'The Caves of the Thousand Buddhas' at Tun-huang, on the extreme western frontier of China. The romantic circumstances of the discovery have been fully described by Sir Aurel in the second volume of his *Ruins of Desert Cathay*; and to those pages the reader is referred. But it may be well to recall briefly the main facts of the narrative.

In March 1907 Sir Aurel Stein's expedition, which had left Kashmir in April of the preceding year, arrived at Tun-huang. From Kāshgar the travellers had proceeded to Yārkanḍ; thence to Khotan, where Sir Aurel on his previous journey in 1900-1 had disinterred such interesting remains of the ancient civilization once flourishing in that region; thence eastward along the southern skirts of the great desert, exploring various sites by the way with rich results, till at Tun-huang they found themselves at last within the western border of the Chinese province of Kan-su.

Tun-huang is a square-walled town in a prosperous oasis of the desert. Sir Aurel Stein had been attracted thither by the knowledge that near the oasis were a number of sacred grottos known as 'The Caves of the Thousand Buddhas', filled with ancient Buddhist frescoes and sculptures.¹ But after arriving at Tun-huang, he also heard, through a Muhammadan trader, rumours of something still more exciting to the archaeologist—a hidden deposit of manuscripts which had been accidentally discovered a few years previously in one of the caves. In a barren valley to the south-east of the town, above a narrow strip of irrigated soil, with rows of elms and poplars, there is a cliff of conglomerate rock, which is honeycombed with hundreds of cavities. These have been hollowed out to serve as Buddhist shrines, still frequented by pious worshippers; and the walls of the cellas are covered with old frescoes.

It was in one of the larger shrines that the deposit of manuscripts had been discovered by the Taoist monk in charge of certain grottos. The monk had collected money from the faithful, and had undertaken to restore this particular shrine to its former splendour; a laborious work, since the drifting of the sand and falls of crumbling rock had here, as in many other cases, blocked the entrance of the cave, and the sand and debris had to be cleared away before the actual work of the restorer could begin. While the men engaged on this labour were at work, they had noticed a crack in the frescoed wall of the passage between temple and antechapel. An opening was found; and this led to a recess hollowed out of the rock behind the stuccoed wall. The room thus disclosed proved to be completely filled with

rolls of manuscript. Specimens had been sent to the Viceroy of the Province, but no steps had been taken to remove them; and in fact when Sir Aurel Stein first arrived at the Caves he found that the deposit was carefully locked away behind a wooden door; and when, after leaving Tun-huang for a month's journey of exploration, he returned in May, a brick wall had been added to protect the hidden treasure.

The reader must go to *Ruins of Desert Cathay* for the full account of the stages by which the Taoist priest who guarded the shrines was induced first to show some specimens, and finally to let Sir Aurel carry off a goodly hoard of the manuscripts and most of the pictorial remains.

The cave had been said to contain only MSS.; and bundles of MSS. were there in immense quantities; but on opening one of the bundles Sir Aurel was delighted to find that it contained paintings on silk. The paintings were all, or nearly all, crumpled up. It seems as if they had been hurriedly thrust away in the vault on some sudden alarm, probably of a barbarian raid. And, in fact, on one of the pictures is a votive inscription praying to Kuan-yin for protection against the Tartars and the Tibetans. The position of Tun-huang on the westernmost frontier of China, at the intersection of the great trade-route across Asia, from east to west, with the high road between Mongolia in the north and Tibet in the south, naturally exposed it to incursions and invasions. Internal evidence of dated documents seems to show that the treasure, or at any rate the great bulk of it, was hidden away soon after the close of the tenth century A.D.

To complete the story, we must add that M. Pelliot, the distinguished savant and traveller, paid a visit a year later to the Caves and was allowed to carry off what remained of the paintings and a large selection from the hoard of manuscripts. These are now in the Bibliothèque Nationale and in the Louvre. What was left of Chinese manuscripts was subsequently transmitted by official order to Peking; much being 'lost' on the way.

Not till the paintings were brought to London could any real examination of them be made. Each packet had to be carefully opened, and the brittle, dusty silk, sometimes in a hundred fragments, opened out, cleaned, and, where necessary, pieced together. This was done at the British Museum; and it was a labour of years for the staff of mounters attached to the Print Room.

The paintings were carefully cleaned, and the colours were found in most cases to have lost little of their pristine depth and brightness; though where a certain verdigris green was used, it has tended to eat away the silk on which it was laid, a whole figure in some cases having thus disappeared and left only its surrounding outline. Any attempt at restoration or retouching has been scrupulously avoided; but when a painting which is in fragments has been laid down on silk of a neutral tone, and mounted, the eye is easily carried over the gaps, and the main design reappears. Several of the paintings still retain their original borders, usually of a dull mulberry-purple silk. The small banners, of which a great quantity were found, had all originally a pediment-shaped head-piece, and long silk streamers with a wooden weight at the bottom to steady

the banner as it hung. These banners are mostly painted on both sides.

The delicate work of mounting and cleaning was done by Mr. S. W. Littlejohn, Chief Mounter in the Department of Prints and Drawings, assisted in later stages by Mr. Y. Urushibara, a Japanese artist and craftsman. Meanwhile the large embroidery picture (Pl. [xxxiv](#)) had been skilfully stitched on to a new backing of canvas by Miss E. A. Winter of the Royal School of Art Needlework. A selection of the most important pictures, drawings, and woodcuts formed part of an exhibition of treasures of all sorts brought back by Sir Aurel Stein from his second expedition and set out in the long lower gallery of the new wing of the British Museum opened by H.M. the King in May 1914. The outbreak of the War so soon after, and the subsequent closing of the Museum, unfortunately prevented the exhibition from becoming adequately known to the public. In 1917 Mr. Littlejohn, who had received a commission in the R.G.A., was killed in action. During his last months at the Museum he had been preparing a note on the origin of the system of mounting pictures as *kakemono*, to use the convenient Japanese term. Those familiar with Japanese pictures know that *kakemono* are paintings mounted on silk, with borders of brocade above and below the design, and with two narrow strips of silk hanging down from above. These have been explained as intended to keep away birds, or evil spirits; but neither theory has ever seemed satisfactory; and in the streamers of the Tun-huang banners, as Mr. Littlejohn perceived, was a much more plausible explanation of their origin. They are a survival. And other details in the Japanese

(originally Chinese) system of mounting could be explained, he suggested, by a reference to this forgotten origin.

II

The pictorial treasures brought away from Tun-huang by Sir Aurel, and now divided between the Indian Government and the British Museum, consist of votive paintings (mostly on silk, though a certain number are on paper) of various sizes, some being as much as six or seven feet high; of a long series of small banners on silk and larger banners on linen; of one or two magnificent specimens of embroidery, the finest of which is reproduced (Pls. [xxxiv](#) and [xxxv](#)); of outline drawings, and of woodcuts.

The present publication is intended to illustrate the specimens which have most importance for the study of Eastern art.

The paintings and drawings, with a few unimportant exceptions, are all of Buddhist inspiration. At first sight the limitation of scope and the repetition of similar themes may give an impression of monotony. Closer study reveals a remarkable variety. This variety is due to differences of style, which are accounted for partly by the different dates, still more by the different localities at which they were produced, partly by the very varying degrees of skill in the painters who produced them. Being all found in one place, the paintings might be supposed to be all the product of a single local school. But this is certainly not the case, as a brief examination shows at once. There are specimens (of little account as art) which are purely Indian in style and probably Nepalese; there are examples of the well-defined

Tibetan type of Buddhist picture; there are paintings which are entirely Chinese; and there are, lastly, a number which contain Indian, Chinese, and possibly Tibetan elements in varying proportions, but are in an intermediate style and may safely be held to be the product of local schools of Chinese Turkestān, and of the region which, on the east, joins it to China proper.

Until a few years ago, scarcely anything was known in Europe of Buddhist painting beyond the famous frescoes of Ajaṅṭā in India and Buddhist paintings by Japanese masters, of which the frescoes in the Horiuji Temple at Nara are among the oldest and most celebrated. It was known that the Japanese modelled their work closely on Chinese tradition; and a few Chinese Buddhist paintings of early periods are preserved in Japan; but while an extensive series of ancient Japanese *Butsu-yé* exists, corresponding specimens from China are very rare indeed. And if the early Buddhist art of China was little known, still less was known of the intermediate links in the tradition which passed on from India to China through Turkestān. But now, through successive explorations and discoveries, the story of Buddhist art and the phases of its progress eastwards through Asia are fairly plain and familiar. And some of the most illuminating and important documents have been supplied by the discoveries of Sir Aurel Stein.

In the paintings with which we are dealing, the Indian element is obviously very strong, just as 'The Caves of the Thousand Buddhas', where they were found, were hollowed out of the cliff in obedience to immemorial Indian tradition: we are reminded at once of the frescoed caves of Ajaṅṭā.

But there are other elements besides the Indian, as we shall see.

How did Buddhism penetrate into Central Asia? From India proper it travelled by way of the extreme north-west frontier, the valley of Peshawar, then known as the kingdom of Gandhāra; thence to the countries lying north, and so eastwards by the great trade-route across the desert to China. Gandhāra is the first stage of this long journey: and it was in Gandhāra that the Buddhist art of the Further East, as we know it, was first formulated. The now well-known sculptures of Gandhāra, a fine series of which may be seen in the British Museum, date from about the first century of our era to about the sixth. They represent a late Hellenistic tradition put to the service of the Indian religion. It was in Gandhāra that the types of Buddhist art became fixed. It was there that the type of Śākyamuni himself was first invented, or rather adapted from the ideal forms of Hellenistic sculpture. For some centuries after the Buddha's death, Indian artists had always refrained from representing the image of the Lord.

The Hellenistic element, apparent in poses, in drapery, in decorative motifs like the acanthus-ornament, tends to become submerged in the later phases of the art, though something of it still persists recognizably in the Buddhist art of remote Japan, even to-day. At a desert site of Khotan, the little kingdom lying at the southern edge of the Taklamakān Desert, beyond the mountains on the north-eastern frontier of Ladākh and Kashmir, Sir Aurel Stein found on his first expedition (1900-1) the remains of settlements abandoned to the encroaching sand about the third century A.D. Among

these remains were heaps of letters and documents written in early Indian script and language on wooden tablets, tied with string and sealed; and in most cases the seal was a Greek seal, engraved with a figure of Athene, Heracles, or other deity. Again, at Mīrān, a site near Lop-nōr and much further east, Sir Aurel, on his second expedition, discovered Buddhist shrines adorned with frescoes of about the fourth century A.D. painted in the style of late classical tradition.

Fascinating as are these traces of Greece and the West in the midst of the Asian deserts, the influence of Hellenism was not profound or formative. India was the main influence on the culture of the cities once flourishing along the chain of oases in the deserts west of China, Buddhism the great civilizing factor, and Gandhāra the source from which the local schools of art drew their inspiration. Gandhāra art was itself not without some admixture from Persian sources; and Iranian motives of decoration are found in these desert sites, as they are found in China itself, just as some of the Tun-huang manuscripts are written in the Iranian dialect called Sogdian. The art of Turkestān is full of mixed influences, the reflection of its civilization.

And what of China? For during the second century B.C. and the two centuries following China pursued a policy of political and military expansion westward, with a view to opening up trade-routes, consolidating her frontiers and protecting them from the ravages of the Huns and other tribes; and Eastern Turkestān became a Chinese protectorate. Though afterwards China's hold became weakened and her power receded, in the seventh century A.D., under an Emperor of the great T'ang dynasty, the

whole region came again under Chinese government, and the Empire's political sphere of influence was extended as far as the borders of Persia and the shores of the Caspian. But Chinese influence seems to have been confined mainly to administration, and to have affected but little the culture of the people, though traces of it are discernible in their arts and industries, ever more marked as we go further east.

This way passed the old great high road between east and west, by which the Chinese silks were carried overland to Antioch and the Roman Empire. It was a highway for commerce, but also for ideas and religions. And the early centuries of our era were marked by an extraordinary ferment of mystical beliefs both in east and west. While Christianity and Mithraism were contending for supremacy in the Roman Empire, Buddhism was making its victorious progress eastwards. But it was no longer the simple ethical doctrine preached by Gautama. Mahāyāna Buddhism, as the later development of Buddhism is called—the Great Vehicle, as opposed to the Hīnayāna, or Small Vehicle, of the original doctrine—was first formulated about the first century A.D. It was no longer the salvation of the individual which was the aim of the devout, but the salvation of the whole world, towards which the Bodhisattvas strive unceasingly out of their boundless love for every sentient being. The Bodhisattvas in this new phase of Buddhism became more and more the object of popular worship. They are either men who, having won the right to enter Buddhahood, refuse that peace for the sake of suffering mankind, or else celestial beings who assume a human form. Of this last order of beings is Avalokiteśvara, whom the Chinese know

as Kuan-yin, and the Japanese as Kwannon; the favourite object of adoration in Mahāyāna Buddhism. He appears in art both in male and female form. In later art the female form is almost universal, but in the Tun-huang paintings the male form is predominant. Avalokiteśvara is the spiritual son of Amitābha, the impersonal Buddha, the Light of the Enlightened; and Amitābha is said to have created a Paradise in the West, where souls who believe in him may be born and rest for a long age, or in popular belief for ever. Śākyamuni, we note, has no longer the supreme position, though sometimes he is painted as reigning over a Paradise, or, as in the large embroidery-picture (Pl. [xxxiv](#)), standing on the Vulture Peak, the scene of his last teaching.

As Avalokiteśvara is incarnate Pity, so, among other great Bodhisattvas, Mañjuśrī embodies the Spirit of Wisdom, Samantabhadra stands for the power of the Church, Kṣitigarbha is the breaker of the powers of Hell and the illuminator of its darkness. Bhaiṣajyarāja is the lord of medicine; and Maitreya is the Buddha that is to come.

Besides the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, the Lokapālas or Demon Kings who guard each one of the Four Quarters of the World are frequent figures in art. These are survivals of primitive demon-worship adopted into Buddhism.

The subjects of the Tun-huang paintings are, then, single figures of Bodhisattvas, especially of Avalokiteśvara, or of the Lokapālas; small pictures of scenes from Gautama's life, or the Jātakas, stories of his lives in previous incarnations; and representations of the Western Paradise. This last subject is sometimes highly elaborated, with an immense number of figures of the blest grouped in pavilions and

terraces built about a lotus lake. Flowers are rained through the air, and celestial beings dance and sing for the delight of the souls dwelling in the Happy Land of Amitābha's creation.

All this carries us far indeed from the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path—the simple doctrine in which Śākyamuni taught the means of Salvation here on earth. Much of this later Buddhism was doubtless an accretion from other faiths with which it came in contact on its progress through Asia. Amitābha may be a borrowing from the worship of Mithras; and certain of the Bodhisattvas may have been originally deified heroes of lands into which Buddhism made its way. In Eastern Turkestān, Manichaeism, the religion founded by the Persian Mani in the third century A.D., found a home; and at Turfān—one of the oases which have been explored—Manichaeans, Buddhists, and Christians were living peaceably side by side.

For the study of religion, then, the art found in the various sites on the borders of the Taklamakān and Lop deserts is of extraordinary interest. But, as art, it is of a local and provincial type, and though often of considerable merit, it nowhere rises beyond a certain level.

III

But at Tun-huang we are within the frontiers of China proper; and Chinese art during the T'ang period, seventh to tenth century A.D., was at its grandest height of power. The extraordinary interest of these paintings is that, though a great number of them are, as we might expect, obviously provincial productions (e.g. Pls. [xxiv](#) and [xxvi](#)), others belong

to the central tradition of Chinese Buddhist painting; and as scarcely any such paintings of the T'ang period are known to exist, the importance of this group, for the study of Chinese art, can hardly be overestimated.

How do we know that these paintings belong to that central tradition? We know it from the early Buddhist paintings of Japan, of which noble masterpieces (some perhaps actually Chinese) are preserved in the Japanese temples. Even if we did not know that the early Japanese painters founded their style entirely on the T'ang masters, the Tun-huang pictures, sometimes so singularly close to the Japanese Buddhist art of the same period, would prove it.

Plate [iii](#) reproduces rather more than the left-hand half of a large painting, which itself seems to be only the upper portion of a still larger composition. The original offers extreme difficulties to photography; and though the reproduction is more successful than might have been anticipated, it is necessary to study the original to appreciate the delicacy of the drawing, especially of the faces of the Bodhisattvas. The serene grandeur of the design is enhanced by a pervasion of grace in the delineation of every form. Here, surely, is the hand of a master. Rivalling this in beauty is the large painting of which a portion is reproduced on Plate [i](#), and another portion on Plate [ii](#). Here there is a similar delicate expressiveness of drawing, combined with a glowing animation of varied colour. The picture is full of exquisite detail. Note the life and charm, for instance, in the figure seated with her back to us in the window of the high pavilion in the upper right-