



The Five Hundred Lohans Scroll Reproduction

This extremely fine silk weaving illustrates the five hundred Buddhist deities known as lohans. The handscroll can be divided into nine pictorial segments, each reflecting one of nine poems which deal with Buddhist subjects such as the Buddha descending from Western Paradise, the proclaiming of the Law and the enlightenment of the universe. In spite of the Buddhist theme, however there is a great deal of Daoist mythology incorporated into the activities of the numerous lohans who populate the paradise setting. This remarkable work originally belonged to the Qinglong emperor and the beginning of the scroll displays three of his nine imperial seals.

The Nine episodes:

1. Buddha Descending from Western Paradise³⁵
2. Ju Lai Exhorting the Ignorants
3. The proclaiming of the Law (Wonderful Truth)
4. Glowing Rays Shining on Heaven and Earth
5. The Whole Universe is Enlightened
6. Gold Mountain and Wisdom Sea
7. A Mother Heart Benefits the People
8. Precious Gold Tripod and Long-Lived Buddha
9. Return to the Western Paradise

The story and the various episodes, are recorded in ten Chinese poems at the end of the scroll.

There are five characters on the outside of scroll, which give the title WU PAI LO HAN HSIANG (500 Lohan Images).

The four Chinese characters on the pale yellow silk, reserved for imperial use, are the hand of Emperor Qinglong who made them in 1796, the year after his abdication. The three small seals are felicitations. The scroll is mounted in fine yellow silk with an all-over ground of geometric medallions and finished with white jade clasp.

What is a Lohan?

Arhat (Sanskrit: “one who is worthy”)

Lohan (Chinese)

Rakan (Japanese)

In Buddhism, a perfected person, one who has gained insight into the true nature of existence and has achieved nirvana (spiritual enlightenment) through his own efforts. The lohan, having freed himself from the bonds of desire, will not be reborn. The lohan is free from the bonds of ignorance, excitability, ambition, and the desire for existence in either the formed or formless worlds.

Lohan were often depicted on the walls of temples in groups of 16 (later enlarged to 18, or even 500). They represent 16 close disciples of the Buddha who were entrusted by him to remain in the world and not to enter nirvana until the coming of the next buddha (Buddha Maitreya), to provide people with objects of worship. Except under extraordinary circumstances, a man or woman can become an lohan only while a monk or nun.

Construction

The scroll is a tapestry weave construction called *kesi*. Kesi means “cut silk” which derives from the visual illusion of cut threads, that is created by distinct, unblended areas of color. It is an extremely fine weave, woven on a small loom with a needle as a shuttle. with traces of pigment. Chinese kesi tapestries woven in a pictorial design and are extremely fine in texture and light in weight. The warps are vertical in relation to the pattern, rather than horizontal as in European weaving. The kesi technique was often used to copy famous paintings. This scroll is 350 inches long, or over 29 feet.

Sources

Mia Label and TMS database

Encyclopedia Britannica

Power and Beauty Connection

The Five Hundred Lohans - Room 9

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setting. This remarkable work originally belonged to the Qinglong emperor and the beginning of the scroll displays three of his nine imperial seals.

The Five Hundred Lohans, 1736-1795, Kesi (cut silk) with traces of pigment L.350 x W. 16-3/4 in. 42.8.343 <https://collections.artsmia.org/art/664/the-five-hundred-lohans-china>

Collection Connections

A Gathering of Lohans

Buddhist themes in jade are relatively rare, and this carved boulder is especially unusual in the way it depicts a group activity within an imaginary setting. The subject is the eighteen Lohans, shown here with their attendants in a variety of activities. Most are seen conversing in small groups. One rides a tiger, an animal strongly associated with Buddhism, while another cavorts with dragons in the clouds. Cloud patterns above, waves below, and tree and rock formations at either end suggest principal elements of heaven and earth. Lohans are enlightened saintly men. Eccentric and reclusive in lifestyle, they nevertheless signify the meditative, nonmaterial values of Buddhism and they were a favorite theme in religious paintings from the Sung dynasty onward.

A Gathering of Lohans, 17th-18th century, Grayish white nephrite, 92.102.3 (G200)
<https://collections.artsmia.org/art/4338/a-gathering-of-lohans-china>

The Eighteen Lohans

This highly imaginative series of paintings depicts the eighteen Buddhist Lohan with heavily distorted features in almost cartoonlike imagery. Lohan, also known as arhats, are enlightened disciples of Buddha and protectors of the Buddhist law. The artist Leng Mei was a leading court artist capable of a superb outline style (baimiao) and brilliantly colored figures that display Western-style modeling in facial features and shadows. Leng's extraordinary fantasy beasts, the Lohan's vehicles and sidekicks, possess a nightmarish charm that is humorous and original.

Leng Mei, The Eighteen Lohans, c. 1690, Ink and color on paper 2001.71 (G203)
https://collections.artsmia.org/search/Lohans/filters/room:G*