
Title of Object

The Five Hundred Lohans

Photo of Object (optional)



Object Information

Artist: Unknown artist

Culture: Chinese (Qing Dynasty)

Date of Object: 1736-1795

Country: China

Accession Number: 42.8.343

File Created: 7/1/2017

Material/Medium: K'ossu (silk brocade) with traces of pigment

Author of File: Mary Ann Wark

Department: Chinese, South and Southeast Asian Art

Reviewer of File: Kara ZumBahlen

Last Updated/Reviewed: 1/3/2018

Tour Topics

Taste of Asia, Artists materials and techniques, Buddhism, Textiles, silk, spirituality/sacred, Daoism, power/status, deities, artist/patron, gods/goddesses, Chinese art, landscape, water, nature

Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

Take a moment to look closely at the object. Based on what you can see, what materials were used to make this?

How is this form of "painting" different from something flat on the wall?

What are you noticing, what draws you in?

What images perhaps show ideas of "Paradise"?

Describe the treatment of space. What is the relationship of things on the top, middle, bottom?

Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

Subject matter: 1. **From Wikipedia:** The Eighteen Arhats (in Chinese: Lohans) are depicted in Mahayana Buddhism as the original followers of the Buddha who have followed the Eightfold Path and attained the Four Stages of Enlightenment. They have reached the state of Nirvana and are free of worldly cravings.

They are charged to protect the Buddhist faith and to await on earth for the coming of Maitreya, a prophesied enlightened Buddha to arrive on earth many millennia after Gautama Buddha's death and nirvana. In China, the eighteen lohans are also a popular subject in Buddhist art. ... Originally, the lohans were composed of only 10 disciples of Gautama Buddha, ...Earliest Chinese representations can be traced back to as early as the fourth century....later this number increased to sixteen to include patriarchs and other spiritual adepts. Somewhere between the late Tang Dynasty and early Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period of China two other Lohans were added to the roster increasing the number to 18. But this depiction of 18 Lohans only gained a foothold in China, whereas other areas like Japan continued to revere only sixteen and their roster differs somewhat. This depiction of having 18 instead of 16 Lohans continues into modern Chinese Buddhist traditions.

A cult built around the Lohans as guardians of Buddhist faith gained momentum amongst Chinese Buddhists at the end of the ninth century for they had just been through a period a great persecution under the reign of Emperor Tang Wuzong. In fact the last two additions to this roster, Taming Dragon and Taming Tiger, are thinly veiled swipes against Taoism.

Because no historical records detailing what the Lohans looked like existed, there were no distinguishing features to tell the Lohans apart in early Chinese depictions. The first portraits of the 16 Lohans were painted by the monk Guan Xiu (Chinese: 貫休; pinyin: Guànxīū) in 891 AD, who at the time was residing in Chengdu. Legend has it that the 16 Lohans knew of Guan Xiu's expert calligraphy and painting skills, so they appeared to the monk in a dream to make a request that he paint their portraits. The paintings depicted them as foreigners having bushy eyebrows, large eyes, hanging cheeks and high noses. They were seated in landscapes, leaning against pine trees and stones. An additional theme in these paintings was that they were portrayed as being unkempt and "eccentric," which emphasizes that they were vagabonds and beggars who have left all worldly desires behind. When Guan Xiu was asked how he came up with the depictions, he answered: "It was in a dream that I saw these Gods and Buddhas. After I woke up, I painted what I saw in the dream." These portraits painted by Guan Xiu have become the definitive images for the 18 Lohans in Chinese Buddhist iconography, although in modern depictions they bear more Sinitic features and at the same time have lost their exaggerated foreign features in exchange for more exaggerated expressions.

The Qianlong Emperor was a great admirer of the Lohans and during his visit to see the paintings (by Guan Xiu) in 1757, Qianlong not only examined them closely but he also wrote a eulogy to each Lohan image. Copies of these eulogies were presented to the monastery and preserved. In 1764, Qianlong ordered that the paintings held at the Shengyin Monastery be reproduced and engraved on stone tablets for preservation. These were mounted like facets on a marble stupa for public display. The temple was destroyed during the Taiping Rebellion but copies of ink rubbings of the steles were preserved in and outside of China.

From Harvard.edu: 500 Buddhist deities. Arhats or Arahants are saints or sages said to have renounced nirvana (freedom from the cycle of suffering and rebirth), vowed to remain in the world to protect the Dharma and propagate the Law of the Buddha in order to devote themselves more effectively to the relief of human misery, like the Bodhisattvas. These 16 Arhats, personal disciples distinguished by the Buddha, formed part of the 500 claimed by tradition to have attended the First Council in Rajagrha. The names and abodes of these 16 arhats are given in a work entitled "Record on the Duration of the Law, spoken by the Great arhat Nadimitra," which was translated into Chinese by the famous pilgrim Xuanzang (596-664) in 654. 16 lohans are quite often represented, especially in China and Japan, in

sculpture and painting, in poses and with attributes. Every lohan can be easily with special iconographic characteristics. ; Guanxiu (Jiang Deyin or Deyuan, a Buddhist monk also named Master Chan Yue, 832-912) -- painter during late Tang to Five Dynasties, specialized in painting lohan figures. Legend has it that the first portraits of the 18 Lohans were painted by Guan Xiu, in 891 A.D. According to records, it was because of his expert painting skill that the Lohans chose him to paint their portraits. Guanxiu depicted lohans in the form of "those beyond this world"-- strangely eccentric.

Newark Museum: The title of arhat (called lohan in Chinese, nanhan in Korean or rakan in Japanese) distinguishes the original disciples of the Historical Buddha (just as the disciples of Jesus Christ are called apostles). Often known by name and affiliated with particular stories and iconography, over the past 2500 years different groupings of arhat became popular in different Buddhist regions. Tibetan Buddhist religious art usually depicts groupings of either sixteen or eighteen arhat, but in the Chinese and Japanese Buddhist traditions even larger groups of as many as five hundred arhat became mythologized.

National Palace Museum: Lohans were originally disciples of the Buddha who, over time, became bodhisattva-like figures who could assist others. In China, a belief system developed around them, but not so in India. In fact, lohans became an important subject in the art and literature of China. As a group, lohans grew in number from 16 and 18 all the way to 500. Due to their Indian origins, lohans are often shown in Chinese art as monks with foreign features and clothes. Typical representations of them include preaching the Buddha's way and manifesting their special powers, such as subduing a dragon or a tiger.

2. 9 pictorial segments --each reflecting one of the 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.

3. Pine trees and rocks are symbols of longevity. Mountains, clouds, streams.

4. Daoist mythology, too, is incorporated into the activities of the numerous lohans who populate the paradise setting. (artsmia)

Medium and techniques of manufacture:

From Wikipedia: Brocade silk (one sided). K'o-ssu (also called Kesi) means cut silk, a name that comes from the appearance of cut threads created by the use of color in the pictorial design. Unlike continuous weft brocade, in K'ossu each color area was woven from a separate bobbin, making the style both technically demanding and time-consuming. There are vertical gaps between adjacent areas of color visible then held up to the light. Like tapestry in west. A needle is the shuttle. The weave is microscopically fine—Compared to Gobelins tapestry may have 30 warp threads to the inch, Song kesi has double that. Song kesi has 300 weft threads per inch of warp, compared with 56 of Gobelins.

Style:

From A World of Radiant Awakening: Buddhism and the Painting of China: Professional artists generally focused on figurative paintings, including depictions of buddhas, bodhisattvas (nearly enlightened beings that stay on earth to help people), arhats (the original followers of the Buddha), and eminent monks. During the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) the imperial patronage of esoteric Buddhism—the

primary school of Tibetan Buddhism—resulted in a vast number of religious works in the Tibetan style. These paintings combine Tibetan attention to iconographic detail with Chinese decorative elements.

Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

1. A handscroll is meant to be intimate, revealed one arm's length at a time. Because it was for occasional viewing as opposed to being in constant view (like Western art), it had the feeling of surprise. (Met Museum)

Many kesi or k'ossu imitated paintings and were mounted on scrolls or album leaves, like the paintings. (Britannica)

2. Weaving in silk and hemp. Silk invented 500 BCE. Chinese already accomplished and producing for the export market for 2000 years. The Silk Road gets its name because the most desired, most luxurious product traded was silk. The Silk Road derives its name from the lucrative trade in silk (and horses) carried out along its length, beginning during the Han dynasty (207 BCE – 220 CE). The Han dynasty expanded Central Asian sections of the trade routes around 114 BCE, largely through missions and explorations of the Chinese imperial envoy, Zhang Qian. The Chinese took great interest in the safety of their trade products and extended the Great Wall of China to ensure the protection of the trade route.

According to legend, the consort of the Yellow Emperor first taught the Chinese People how to cultivate the mulberry on which the silkworm feeds and to spin, dye and weave threads. So important was the silk industry that until the 1911 Revolution, the empress sacrificed to the spirit of the consort of the Yellow Emperor every year in her temple. (Wikipedia)

3. Buddhism reached China sculpture and then architecture in the 4th c.

4. Woven by professional artists who focused on figurative depictions of buddhas, bodhisattvas (nearly enlightened beings who stay on earth to help people), arhats (the original followers of Buddha). (A World of Radiant Awakening)

5. K'ossu first appeared in the Tang Dynasty (618-907), and became popular in the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279), reaching its height during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). The style continued to be popular until the early 20th c. and the end of the Qing Dynasty in 1911-12. (Wikipedia)

6. Belonged to the Ch'ien-lung emperor and the beginning of the scroll displays his imperial seals. (artsmia)

Current Mia Label Information (optional)

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 Taoist mythology incorporated into the activities of the numerous lohans who populate the paradise setting. This remarkable work originally belonged to the Ch'ien-lung emperor and the beginning of the scroll displays three of his nine imperial seals.

Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

Gallery information for exhibit: A World of Radiant Awakening: Buddhism and the Painting of China

Wikipedia, various articles: Silk Road, K'ossu, 18 arhats

Tapestry, article from Britannica: <https://www.britannica.com/art/tapestry#ref1079822>

Met Museum Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History: Chinese Handscrolls:
https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/chhs/hd_chhs.htm

Michael Sullivan, *The Arts of China*, Fifth Edition, p 95, pp 247-8.

Newark Museum, exhibition "Arhat, Disciples of the Historical Buddha."
<https://www.newarkmuseum.org/arhat>

Sixteen Arhats at Shengyin Temple, Chinese Rubbings Collection, Harvard.edu:
<http://vc.lib.harvard.edu/vc/deliver/~rubbings/olvwork245882>

Lohans Painted on a Bodhi Leaf, National Palace Museum:
<http://www.npm.gov.tw/english/exhibition/edon0104/a/sel-main.htm>