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The Transformations of the Bodhisattva of Compassion in Early Asian Art

Through the first to fifteenth centuries CE, Buddhist doctrine migrated from India to China, Korea and Japan on the Silk Road. Along the way, the art that defined it became subject to changes in representation, in both style and iconography. Two important examples of products of such cross-cultural connections live in the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. The first is *Bodhisattva Guanyin of the Water Moon*, a tenth century Northern Song (960-1127) hanging scroll originally found in Dunhuang, which is a cave-temple site strategically located along the Silk Road in the Gansu Province of China. Its creation was a direct result of the interpretation of religious scriptures, such as the *Lotus Sutra*, in China as well the artistic innovation taking place during the time. The second is *Bodhisattva Kannon Flanked by Monkeys*, a fifteenth century set of three hanging scrolls made during the Muromachi Period (1333-1576) in Japan. This piece of art came into being purely through cross-cultural contact with China. While they have a few similarities including some intriguing connections to Chan/Zen philosophy, the two scrolls portraying two avatars of Avalokitesvara are clearly distinctive in their visual aesthetics, the functions they performed in society, as well as the path they took to enter the artistic arenas of their respective cultures.

A careful documentation of the visual aesthetics is imperative in order to compare and contrast the two paintings. In the *Bodhisattva Guanyin of the Water Moon*, Guanyin is frontally portrayed sitting on a lotus throne beneath a floral baldachin, wearing vibrant clothing and ornate

jewelry. In his left hand, he holds a *kalasa* flask containing ambrosia and in his right hand is a willow branch.¹ These are common attributes of Guanyin. Also, as in the case of the Avalokitesvara represented in the eighth century *Amitabha Triad* wall painting from the Main Hall at Horyuji Temple in Nara, Japan, Guanyin has an image of Amitabha, the Buddha of Infinite Light, in his crown, emphasizing that he is his supreme disciple. Contrary to most Chinese depictions of Guanyin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion in this image is male, which is evident from his moustache, goatee, flat chest and muscular body. Here he retains the gender of the original Indian manifestation. The halo behind his head is symbolic of his divinity. Towards the bottom left and right corners are two bodhisattvas, both ostentatiously dressed, who are offering flowers and food to Guanyin. Between them is a flamboyantly-decorated altar table, on which stands a burning, golden lamp with two flasks on either side. In the lower panel of the hanging scroll, the four people depicted are donors of the religious offering. Even though the inscriptions that identify each of the four figures are quite disfigured, and therefore difficult to decipher, “it is clear that the two women kneeling on the left were both surnamed Yin; the smaller standing to the right of the inscription was a concubine. The elaborate headdresses worn by the women, their whitened faces and brilliantly colored beauty patches provide a faithful record of tenth-century feminine fashions.”² The donor on the far right was a member of the Cao family that ruled the independent kingdom of Shazhou, which was the region comprising Dunhuang. The long, central inscription contains the date June 13, 968. The most attractive aspects of this work are the bold bands of color on the draperies and the bright, mineral pigments of halos. This is reflective of the incorporation of Central Asian techniques. On the whole, Guanyin comes across as an imposing and majestic figure.

¹ Thomas Lawton, *Chinese Figure Painting* (Washington, DC: Freer Gallery of Art, 1973), 89.

² *Ibid.* 89.

In contrast, Kannon, in *Bodhisattva Kannon Flanked by Monkeys*, appears to be simple, down-to-earth and motherly. Apart from the presence of the flask and the halo, Kannon doesn't resemble Guanyin at all. Paradoxically, Kannon is the female Goddess of Mercy, which is usually how Guanyin is depicted in Chinese art. She sits under a tree on the banks of a river and is draped in pure white robes that almost flow into the water around her. The natural background shows that it is derived from landscape paintings created in Zen Buddhist monasteries. Unlike the Guanyin painting which patrons contributed funds to create, this painting was, in all probability, painted voluntarily by the artist. This belief is reinforced by the monochromatic nature of the painting and the smooth brushwork, which consists of linear variations. Also, the monkeys on the adjacent scrolls indicate that the artist was surely influenced by Chan painter Mu Qi's thirteenth century hanging scrolls *White-Robed Guanyin, Crane, and Gibbons*. The monkeys represent unenlightened beings. Both cling to the branches of trees, illustrating a sense of attachment to worldly objects. The one on the right is holding on to her baby and looking at her refection in the pool of water below. Apart from the more apparent distinctions in the appearance of the two paintings, it is essential to lay emphasis on the contrast in the spatial compositions of each. While the representation of Guanyin is more two-dimensional and the blank spaces behind are of no particular meaning, Kannon is placed in a more volumetric space, with a clear separation of foreground and background. While it is unclear on what platform Guanyin's devotees are placed or where the altar table is positioned, Kannon is seated in a more natural position on the banks of a river and is juxtaposed against a tree, which in Buddhist doctrine, symbolizes the source of enlightenment. Unlike her male counterpart, who is decked in lavish clothing and is surrounded by decorative objects, she's simply dressed and is focused completely on her meditation.

A visual analysis is incomplete without examining the roles these paintings played in their respective societies as well as the historical context of the style and iconography implemented by the artists. To accomplish this, addressing the twenty-fifth chapter of *Lotus Sutra*, which originated in India around the first century CE, is critical. While this text contains the testament of the Buddha, this particular chapter deals specifically with Avalokitesvara and his mystical and benevolent character. Once the fifth Chinese translation of this text was completed in 406 CE by a famous Indian missionary called Kumarajiva, this section became the most popular chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* in China and transformed this relatively minor figure in Buddha's retinue into one of the main deities in Chinese religion. It is critical to note though that the feminine quality of "Kuan-yin" is "not based on any scriptural source, but rather is an eloquent manifestation of its most important character as the compassionate god."³ The first account of the Water Moon Guanyin, in particular, appeared in the Huayen Sutra. It is believed that T'ang dynasty artist Chou Fang is said to have painted the first image of the Water Moon Guanyin in the Sheng-keng temple at Ch'ang-an. While none of his works survive, four examples of this deity, all dated to the ninth century, were found at Dunhuang and are the earliest examples. Two are in the British Museum, the other two in the Musee Guimet.⁴ Unlike the Freer version, most contemporary Water Moon paintings depict Guanyin in a relaxed pose and in three-quarter view. Chinese scholars argue that the iconography of such paintings, consisting of bamboo, pine and waterfalls, symbols of gentlemen and immortals and typical features of

³ Miyeko Murase, "Kuan-Yin as Savior of Men: Illustration of the Twenty-Fifth Chapter of the Lotus Sūtra in Chinese Painting," *Artibus Asiae* 33, no. 1/2 (1971): 40, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3249788> (accessed December 1, 2010).

⁴ Lawton, *Chinese Figure Painting*, 89.

landscapes, are indigenously Chinese and not based on Indian prototypes.⁵ So what was the role played by this deity in China? The Water Moon Guanyin was invoked by the devotees for “good re-birth, safe childbirth, and enlightenment.”⁶ It was an object of reverence and adulation. In *Bodhisattva Guanyin of the Water Moon*, the hanging scroll gets its title in reference to the large nimbus that surrounds the bodhisattva. The corona is meant to look like the moon that would cast its shadow in the water. This idea of the water moon symbol can be dated back to the eighth and ninth centuries. It was a popular theme for the Dunhuang painters and they were highly involved in the development of this iconography.⁷ Surprisingly, there is no suggestion in any historical scripture of the link between the moon, the water and the bodhisattva. One can discern that it was meant to symbolize the illusory nature of worldly phenomena.⁸ The lotus on which Guanyin is seated highlights the purity that defines the bodhisattva. He is celebrated as the Compassionate One, who alleviates the sufferings of others. In the painting, the worshippers are holding salvers that are overflowing with offerings. All the above features point to the fact that hanging scroll was painted with the purpose of being worshipped.

On the contrary, the Japanese painting *Bodhisattva Kannon Flanked by Monkeys* was not made to be worshipped, but to provide the pleasures of serenity and composure to the viewer. These ideas are rooted in the philosophy of Zen, which outlines the method of quietism.⁹ The followers of Zen are attracted to calm colors and little movement. This can be seen in the works of Sesshu (1420-1506), the famous Muromachi painter, who was influenced by Chinese

⁵ Chun-Fang Yu, *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938), 239.

⁶ Ibid. 241.

⁷ Yu, *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara*, 235.

⁸ Ibid. 235.

⁹ M. Anesaki, *Buddhist Art in its Relation to Buddhist Ideals* (New York: Hacker Art Books, Inc., 1978), 51.

landscapes. The Zen follower is able to take in the outside world and not let it affect the tranquility of his trained mind. The figures that are painted do not identify with any real, living personality. Instead, they are personifications of enlightened beings. Kannon is bereft of most decorations. This is in keeping with the ideas developed by Zen painters wherein there are no golden lights or brilliant colors; the figures appear in white simple robes living amidst nature and are not confined to magnificent halls.¹⁰ They appear to be one with nature, enjoying its bounteous beauty as they go about their business. Kannon's origins are unclear but it is believed that veneration of Kannon in Japan began in the late sixth century soon after Buddhism reached Japan via Korea and China. As time progressed, these foreign influences became more entrenched, resulting in a change in the role of Japanese art.

Exploring the cross-cultural contact is crucial to understanding the reappearance of similar motifs, symbols and ideas in art from different regions across Asia, and also to observing how the paintings that depict the same deity or figure have changed over time. In the late fifteenth century, Japanese art saw the emergence of schools of painting that were distinctly Chinese, which were called *kanga*. Artworks from the Sung and Yuan dynasties were first imported into Japan from China in the late thirteenth century as part of the cultural paraphernalia of Zen Buddhism. This new style triggered an artistic revolution in Japan, especially within Zen temples and the military government of the Muromachi Period. Some of the mainstream painters of the time were Shubun, Sesshu, Soga Jasoku, and Noami, whose models were monochrome ink compositions (*suibokuga*) attributed to Sung painters such as Mu Qi, Ma Yuan and Hsai Kuei.¹¹ This explains the connection between the type of brushwork and iconography used in Southern

¹⁰ Anesaki, *Buddhist Art in its Relation to Buddhist Ideals*, 54.

¹¹ Gail Capitol Weigl, "The Reception of Chinese Painting Models in Muromachi Japan," *Monumenta Nipponica* 35, no. 3 (Fall 1980): 257, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2384260> (accessed December 1, 2010).

Song painter Mu Qi's *White Robed Guanyin, Crane and Gibbons* and, two centuries later, in *Bodhisattva Kannon Flanked by Monkeys*. While Chan-style painting was influencing prominent Zen masters, the polychrome tradition of Japanese painting, or 'painting in the Heian manner,' also referred to as *yamato-e*, became limited to Kano School artists serving in the imperial aristocracy. In the late Muromachi Period, the process of Japanizing Chinese-style monochrome paintings by "patternizing brushwork, flattening shapes and monumentalizing forms on large-scale Japanese formats such as *byōbu* (folding screens) and *fusuma* (sliding door panels)" ¹² had begun.

Thus, while Chinese Buddhist paintings can be seen as a product of the artistic interpretation of religious scriptures and the creativity of the painter, in Japan it was exclusively cross-cultural contact that redefined the traditional painting styles, especially those of Zen. The primary example of this is seen in the two hanging scrolls portraying Avalokitesvara – *Bodhisattva Guanyin of the Water Moon* and *Bodhisattva Kannon Flanked by Monkeys*. While there are several stylistic and iconographic differences between the two artworks, they clearly contribute to the diversity that exists in the manifestations of the Bodhisattva of Compassion.

¹² Richard Louis Edmonds, et al. "Japan." In *Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online*, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T043440pg10> (accessed December 2, 2010).

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