

From the Profound to the Mundane: Depictions of Lohans in Late Ming China

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Introduction

As Buddhism slowly integrated itself into the fabric of Chinese society, it was altered and modified by native traditions in ways that made it more accessible to Chinese beliefs and customs. The enduring impact of Central Asian and Indian themes, styles, and aesthetics has seldom been acknowledged by Chinese artists and critics in recent centuries, but was more clearly evident among the works of Chinese artists of the Tang, Song, Liao, and Jin dynasties. By careful examination of earlier works of Buddhist art, it can be discerned how strongly later Chinese artists were influenced by foreign art styles as well as the depiction of foreigners themselves in Chinese painting and sculpture. Even the changing prevalence of different schools of Buddhist thought directly affected the choice of subject matter, such as personages and events, and the methods of representation chosen. Ultimately, at the same time, some native Chinese sensibilities rooted in Confucianism and Daoism were also integrated into the images created by Chinese Buddhist artists.

Buddhist scriptures and artistic canons brought by monks from India and Central Asia represented sacred truth in words and images to Chinese devotees. Particularly in the representation of Sakyamuni Buddha, drastic alterations of such sacred canons or writings would have meant a violation of their spiritual power. According to tradition, Sakyamuni Buddha was endowed with thirty-two major and eighty minor signs, such as elongated earlobes, webbed feet and hands, and a protuberance on his cranium that had characterized the ancient Indian concept of a *chakravartin* or universal monarch. However, not all of these marks of excellence were consistently followed by artists and theologians. By the Gupta period in India (AD 320-600),

inconsistencies account for the variety of differences evident among images from specific regions and periods, reflecting ethnic differences and aesthetic norms and ideals of human beauty.¹ In addition, artists could express the divinity and universality of the Buddha by creating images that mirrored humankind's endless physical variety, rather than a single race or ethnic group. Thus, soon after the introduction of Mahayana Buddhism to China, a type of image that was iconographically orthodox yet visually acceptable to Chinese worshippers was in widespread use in Buddhist caves in northwest China.²

Buddhist writings and representations also included a wide range of other personages ranging from disciples to laypersons and even animals, all of whom were not confined by such canonical restrictions. These characters lent a genre quality to much of Buddhist art and writings, allowing painters and sculptors new themes and topics for inspiration and innovation. Since these images depicted unenlightened beings, they were thus represented in ways that indicate ethnic specificity as part of their historical identity. Such images reveal the interest in and presence of foreigners in China during periods of political expansion and social tolerance. It was these non-sacred personalities who were most readily chosen for adaptation to meet the demands of native Chinese sensibilities and morals, providing links between the foreign Buddhist religion and the older, more native Chinese Daoist and Confucian schools of thought.

Beyond concerns of form and style are also the questions of content and expression. Buddhism infused Chinese art with a rich pantheon of deities, stories, and emotions which hitherto had not been portrayed by Chinese artists and which lay outside the pre-existing canon of subjects. Among the Confucian concepts which had molded the form and content of pre-Tang Chinese art is that of *li*—variously defined as propriety, good manners, or respect—the external exemplification of eternal principles which regulate and refine human emotions.³ Many of the restrained and dignified styles seen in pre-Buddhist Chinese art come from this concept of *li*. Violent emotions, grotesqueness, or sensuality were seldom portrayed. Yet Indian Buddhist art introduced such qualities that were exploited and modified by Buddhist artists in China, then passed on to court and even literati artists.

FROM THE PROFOUND TO THE MUNDANE

The Evolution of Lohan Depiction in China

One of the earliest depictions of an individual disciple of the Buddha is that of Kashyapa, a Hindu teacher and ascetic who witnessed the Buddha's victory over the powerful snake king that resided in the fire temple, thereby immediately becoming the Buddha's follower. He is often depicted in Buddhist sculptural groups in the caves of Dunhuang, along with Sakyamuni Buddha, Ananda, and a pair of Bodhisattvas. By the eighth century, life-sized sculptural portrayals of Kashyapa can be found in the Dunhuang caves, as exemplified by the one in cave 45. Shown as an introspective philosopher, he is depicted as engaged in thought, alert and self-confident. The sculpting of the head reveals a clear understanding of bone structure and musculature, evidencing the sculptor's close study of actual physical anatomy. His deep-set eyes and prudent smile, his furrowed brow and stubbled chin call to mind the great monks who lived during that era, such as Faxian and Dharmaraksha.⁵

The artistic legacy of the Tang Dynasty continued to influence Buddhist art for several centuries, culminating in an era of technical and artistic excellence during the Liao period (907-1125). A set of life-size ceramic lohans, originally found in the Xiling Mountains in Yizhou, Hebei province, was dispersed into several museum collections in the US and Europe during the 1930s. While debate continues as to when these pieces were made and how many constituted the original set, current studies led to the conclusion that these were probably produced in the area around Yizhou by Chinese artisans captured during the period from 989 to 1125, when the Liao held power in that region.⁶ Of the seven surviving figures in this set, it is the one in the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City which is perhaps the most skillfully executed (figure 1). His throat is full and open, his nostrils flare, even his robe falls loose and open in sweeping curves. The finely modeled features are most arresting; the eyebrows' expressive reverse curves are echoed by those of the full lips and large ears, and again in the curves of the robes falling over the right arm. The curves become a unifying element in the composition of the figure, creating a taut energy. Rather than modeling the figure directly from life, the artist seems to have introduced elements of abstraction, creating a figure that is perfectly balanced and a face that is elegant and idealized. It has become an embodiment of the ideal of all monks—the combination of inner strength and spiritual concentration with outward physical

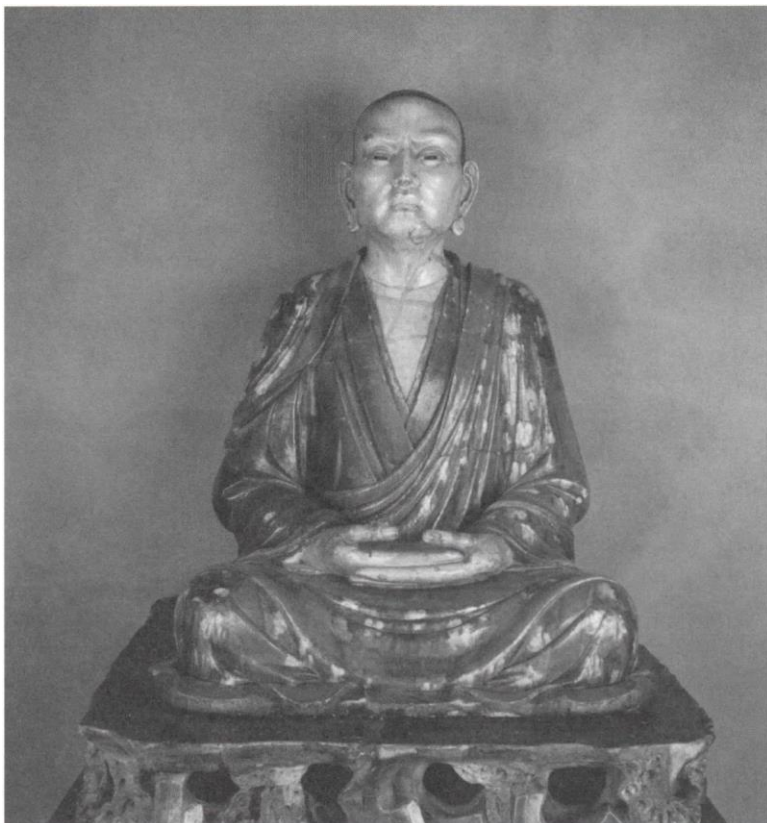


Figure 1. *Lohan*, Liao dynasty (907-1125). Earthenware with three-color lead glaze, height 101.6 cm. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Purchase: Nelson Trust, 34-6. Photo by E. G. Schempf.

beauty and grace, the features of the face are distinctly Chinese, yet not specifically individualized. It is an image meant to inspire the person who seeks for enlightenment to all who see it.

The sense of profound realization evident in the Yizhou image strongly suggests that it is meant to represent a lohan. According to Buddhist legend, when the Buddha preached his sermon in the Deer Park at Sarnath, there were five ascetics who grasped the truth of his doctrine and became his first disciples. During the Buddha's lifetime,

FROM THE PROFOUND TO THE MUNDANE

they and other followers who reached a high level of spiritual enlightenment became known as lohans, a term meaning "worthy ones" or "perfected saints." This term refers specifically to a disciple who has realized his own Buddha-nature through unflinching devotion and practice. The lohans became a focus of cultic activity, with certain individuals or groups of lohans receiving special attention, especially the Ten Great Disciples, the Sixteen (or Eighteen) Lohans, and the Five Hundred Lohans.

The evolution of lohan depiction in China follows a roughly parallel chronology to the rise of Chan Buddhism. Starting with the Indian monk Bodhidharma's arrival in China in AD 520, the emphasis of Chan Buddhism was always on meditative discipline through concentration and controlled breathing. Chan concepts of wordlessness, inaction, communion with nature, personal insight and effort are all very in tune with Chinese Daoism and its reverence for individualistic sages and mystics. In the seventh century, the *Record of the Abiding of the Dharma Spoken by the Great Lohan Nandimitra (Da A Luohan Nandimiduoluo suo shuo fazhuji)* was first translated into Chinese. In this sutra, the protection of the Buddhist law was entrusted by the Buddha to sixteen great lohans, whose transcendental powers and mountainous abodes are described in the sutra in great detail. They are said to be endowed with insight into their former lives and those of others, into future conditions, and into present sufferings through which temptation and passion may be overcome. However, it is their "six kinds of transcendent knowledge" that constitute a close affinity with Daoist immortals, including the capacity to see, hear, or do anything at any time and anywhere. The extraordinary rise in popularity of the Lohan cult during the ninth and tenth centuries most likely had to do with their mystique as omnipotent immortals.⁷

In pictorial representations of the Tang and Song Dynasties, there seems to be a considerable variation in the emphasis between lohans as supernatural beings and as ordinary monks. Nevertheless, the dominant model for several centuries to come was undoubtedly that of the monk-poet and painter Guanxiu (832-912).⁸ Though the recorded set of lohan paintings at a temple in Zhejiang province is no longer extant, close copies survive in a set of Qing dynasty rubbings from stone engravings in Zhejiang province (figure 2). The lohans are portrayed with grotesque yet expressive faces, lost in meditation or sutra recitation. The depiction of the Third Worthy One, the Lohan



Figure 2. *Pindola-bharadvaja*, from a set of sixteen lohans after Guanxiu (832-912), Qing dynasty (1644-1911). Ink rubbing from an engraved stone, ink on paper, 118 x 50.8 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Tiffany Blake, 1942.6.

Pindola, is relatively noble and handsome in comparison with the degree of exaggeration seen in others in the set. A comparison of this Pindola image with the Kashyapa sculpture found in Dunhuang cave 45 reveals striking similarities in the balance sought between physical grotesqueness and spiritual determination.

By about the mid-tenth century the austere and iconic depictions of lohans gave way to the integration of landscape setting, paralleling the rise in importance of landscape painting in general. This was combined with a trend toward the anecdotal and the fantastic, such as the portrayal of lohans engaged in miraculous acts, including flying through the air or moving mountains. Bands of demons and hungry ghosts were often added to the scenes to increase the sense of theatricality.

Two basic styles of lohan painting prevailed during the Song and Yuan periods. The first was large, colorful paintings produced by professional artists for the lohan halls of Buddhist temples. The second style, called *baimiao*, is usually seen in smaller formats, such as handscrolls and albums, and is based on fine ink outlines without color. *Baimiao* paintings were usually produced by monk-painters and lay followers, and had strong associations with Chan Buddhist ideas and practices. The leader of the *baimiao* school of painting was undisputedly Li Gonglin (circa 1041-1106). While no reliable evidence exists for his having produced paintings of lohans, his name became firmly associated with lohan painting in both the colored and *baimiao* styles.

These two traditions of lohan painting were perpetuated throughout the first two centuries of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). It was during this period that a new theme emerged in the repertoire of lohan painting, that of the sixteen or eighteen lohan miraculously crossing the sea. One source for this theme is likely to have been an episode in popular fiction about the Daoist eight immortals. In response to the growing cult of the lohans, popular Daoism also expanded its roster of heroic figures with supernatural powers. By the mid-Ming period, the identities of the Eight Immortals had been established. The literary work by Wu Yuntai (circa 1522-1566), *Record of Travels to the East (Dongyouji)*, includes the episode of the Daoist Immortals crossing the sea. This lively theme was quickly adopted by Buddhist painters of lohans in the sixteenth century, notably Wang Wen (1497-1576), Qiu Ying (1490s-circa 1552) and You Qiu (active 1540-1590).⁹



Figure 3. You Qiu (active 1540 - 1590), *Lohans Crossing the Sea*, dated 1587. Opening section and details. Handscroll, ink on paper, 31.2 x 724 cm. The Roy and Marilyn Papp Collection. Photo by Craig Smith, courtesy of Phoenix Art Museum.

FROM THE PROFOUND TO THE MUNDANE

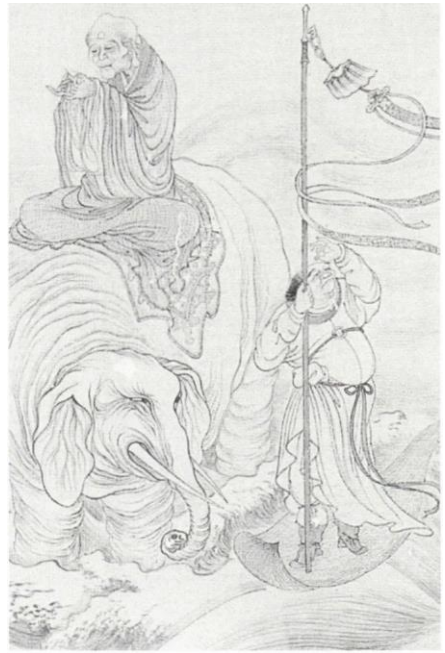
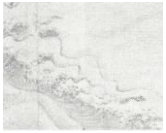




Figure 4. Deng Erya (1883-1954) . Frontispiece to the handscroll in figure 3, ink on paper. The Roy and Marilyn Papp Collection. Photo by Craig Smith, courtesy of Phoenix Art Museum.

Three Examples of late Ming Lohan Painting

In the Roy and Marilyn Papp Collection is a handscroll of the *Lohans Crossing the Sea* painted by You Qiu (figure 3). Rendered in ink on paper, the scroll is dated 1587 and bears an inscription and seal of the artist. Additionally, there is a frontispiece in seal script by Deng Erya (1883-1954) and three collectors' seals on the painting (figure 4).¹⁰ The scroll opens with an image of the Buddhist guardian Weituo and a pair of gnarled-looking porters who bear the lohan s' luggage on their backs, a motley assortment of scrolls, books, umbrella, gourd, scepter, incense burner, and other religious paraphernalia—some Buddhist, others Daoist or even Confucian. The first lohan rides across the waves on a *qi/in* while clutching a sutra in his hand. The subsequent seventeen lohans traverse the sea in manners no less extraordinary, riding an assortment of land and water animals, including bovine, porcine, and porpoise-like creatures, big cats (leopard, tiger, and fantastic lion), and an elephant. A dragon and a magical dam arise from the waves while a crane, emblem of immortality and the mount of immortals, flies overhead.

The lohans' destination is the palace of the Dragon King, who emerges clad in a scaly cape and wielding a jade tablet. He is flanked by a flag bearer and a messenger on horseback as well as another pair of luggage porters bearing more symbolic objects—coral, peacock feathers, rhinoceros horns, and a miniature pagoda. The composition closes with a group of four beautiful maidens standing by the gate to the Dragon King's palace.

The Dragon King is a Chinese interpretation of the Indian *naga* or

FROM THE PROFOUND TO THE MUNDANE

serpent kings who appear in numerous Buddhist stories and images. A scriptural source for this theme is the *Ocean Dragon King Sutra (Hailong wang Jing)* in which the Dragon King was so delighted by Sakyamuni Buddha's sermon that he invited the Buddha to a banquet that he attended accompanied by lohans and bodhisattvas. In much earlier Buddhist folklore, *nagas* served to protect the Buddha from evil. Yet the other beasts shown in the scroll, such as the *qi/in*, tiger, and crane, as well as many of the symbolic objects, such as coral, peacock feathers, rhinoceros horn, fly whisk, and sword, are not specifically Buddhist but instead draw upon Daoist and popular religious sources. This reinforces the Daoist origins to the theme of crossing the sea that has its roots in the tales of the Daoist immortals, as mentioned previously.¹¹

The playful and even humorous treatment of the lohans in the Papp Collection scroll is contrasted by a more serious interpretation found in the scroll painted by one of You Qiu's contemporaries, Ding Yunpeng (1547-circa 1628).¹² Painted in gold on indigo paper (figure 5), this work portrays the eighteen lohans in more conventional activities, such as meditation, mending, conducting esoteric rituals, or reading sutras. The composition seems to be drawn from works portraying Chinese scholars in garden landscape settings pursuing literary and artistic activities. Yet the materials used for this scroll—indigo paper and gold pigment—have long been associated with Buddhist images and sutra illustration. Fine outlines and meticulous detail testify to the high artistic quality of the scroll, which bears Ding's signature. Ding Yunpeng was well-known for his eccentric paintings of lohans in the tradition of Guanxiu. Yet the lack of a strict pictorial canon for the lohans gave Chinese painters the opportunity to create personal interpretations of these foreign disciples.

Another late Ming artist who painted many Buddhist subjects was Wu Bin (active 1583-1626), whose scroll of the sixteen lohans seems to strike a balance between the caricature-like rendition in You Qiu's work and the literati-like portrayal in Ding Yunpeng's work. In a scroll dated 1591 in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (figure 6), the figures of the lohans, joined here by Budai and Bodhidharma, have a charming eccentricity. Their faces are bizarrely wrinkled, yet their poses and garments have a fluid grace in their use of "iron-wire" line, enhanced by delicate colors.¹³

MYRIAD POINTS OF VIEW

Late Ming Buddhism and the Revival of Lohan Painting

The underlying reasons for this renaissance of Lohan painting and its diverse manifestations during the late sixteenth century center around the remarkable renaissance in Buddhism during the Wan-Li era (1573-1620). After a long period of moribund decline, the Wan-Li era saw a complete revitalization, particularly in the intellectual and spiritual accomplishments of the monastic class. Three tendencies can be discerned in Buddhist literature of this period: extreme individualism, doctrinal syncretism, and an interest in and contact with the



Figure 5. Ding Yunpeng (1547-circa 1628), *The Eighteen Lohans*, section. Handscroll, ink colors and gold on indigo blue paper, 32-4 x 337.5 cm. Honolulu Academy of Arts, Gift of Mrs. C. M. Cooke, 1927. HAA 804.

FROM THE PROFOUND TO THE MUNDANE

secular world. These were personified by the "Three Eminent Monks of the Wan-li era," whose public ministries and legendary personalities were a testament to their eccentric individualism: Zipo Dagan (1544-1604), Yunqi Zhuhong (1535-1615), and Hanshan Deqing (1546-1623). They were proponents of an amalgamation of the various sects of Buddhism as well as Daoism and Confucianism.

This syncretism took the form of the movement known as the "Three Religions" or the "Three Teachings" (*sanjiao heyi*). The philosophical basis of late Ming Buddhism was an emphasis placed



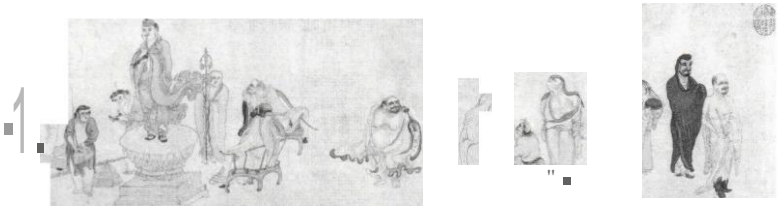


Figure 6. Wu Bin (active 1583-1626), *The Sixteen Lohans*, dated 1591, section. Handscroll, ink and color on paper, 32.4 x 414.33 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Douglas Dillon, 1986.266-4.

on activity (*yong*) rather than on meditation. This approach often took political or secular manifestations. For example, one of the "Three Eminent Monks," Zhu hong , was an advocate of "non-killing" and the release of life. Beyond simply reiterating accepted doctrine , Zhuhong created an ethical system with an attached scale of merits which allowed devotees to measure their spiritual progress. Another of the three monks, Deqing, was driven by a vision of the great monks of the past who had associated with prominent literati. Deqing was able to identify a famous monk of the Yuan period who had accomplished exactly that by moving in the highest of social circles and he adopted him as a personal model. The third monk, Dakuan , actually died in prison as a result of his participation in a controversy that swirled around an imperial succession . The lives of all three monks illustrate an active involvement in society and its affairs and an effort to bring the principles of Buddhism to the world around them.

The popularity of the doctrine of the "Three Religions" as one faith is the best example of syncretism in the Wan-li period revival of Buddhism. Artists such as Ding Yunpeng and You Qiu were certainly aware of it, and it is likely that they supported it. This extends so far as to include an inscription by the monk Dakuan on one of Ding Yunpeng's paintings, written in 1594. This inscription refers to the failure of the Wan-li Emperor to appear at important sacrificial ceremonies following the death and disgrace of his Chief Grand Secretary. The Emperor's lapses caused increased factionalism in the court, leading to a purge. This in turn led to Dakuan's demise . By 1596, Wan-li's neglect of the affairs of state became complete.

FROM THE PROFOUND TO THE MUNDANE

Conclusion

From this brief summary of these three monks' endeavors, it is apparent that none of them was content to sit and meditate in his monastery. They brought Buddhism to the world and often became enmeshed in its affairs. While this involvement with the gentry was an approach to spreading the faith, it also served to solve some of the doctrinal problems that faced Buddhism in the late Ming Dynasty.

This revival of Buddhism in the late Ming period can be described as in part a religious phenomenon reflecting the insecurities of rapid social change and political decay, and in part a moral revival in the face of an unprecedented disintegration of the traditional fabric of personal ethics and social mores. The prevalent sects—Pure Land and Chan—emphasized transcendence and enlightenment, the very themes expressed by many of the subjects chosen for late Ming Buddhist painting. Lohans could be seen as representatives of the ideal of enlightenment in earthly life, yet also as ordinary mortals who dealt with the trials and events of everyday earthly life. The depiction of lohans in various guises and activities served as a parallel to the lives of contemporary monks such as Dagan, Zhuhong, and Deqing. At times the lohans seem to inhabit a fantasy world, as depicted in the Papp scroll of the lohans crossing the sea. Yet other examples, such as Ding Yungeng's scroll of lohans engaged in ordinary activities, would have served as exemplary models of the faith to monks and even to Confucian gentlemen who sought to resolve the discrepancies of the "Three Teachings" during a period of great syncretism in late Ming China.

MYRIAD POINTS OF VIEW

Notes

1. Pratapaditya Pal, "The Buddha Image in India," *Light of Asia. Buddha Sakyamuni in Asian Art*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1984, 144-153.
2. A good example of an early (N. Liang) Buddha figure is found in cave 272, Dunhuang. See *Dunhuang Mogaoku*, I (Beijing: Wenwu Press, 1981), plate 7.
3. Laurence Sickman and Alexander Soper, *The Art and Architecture of China* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1968), 53-54.
4. The figure of Kasyapa on the north side of the west wall niche, cave 45, Dunhuang. See *Dunhuang Mogaoku*, III (Beijing: Wenwu Press, 1987), plate 128.
5. Janet Baker, "Foreigners in Early Chinese Buddhist Art: Disciples, Lohans and Barbarian Rulers," *The Flowering of a Foreign Faith: New Studies in Chinese Buddhist Art*, Mumbai: Marg, 1998, 68-87.
6. Marilyn Leidig Gridley, *Chinese Buddhist Sculpture under the Liao*, (New Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture, 1993), 121.
7. Richard K. Kent, "Depictions of the Guardians of the Law: Lohan Painting in China," *Latter Days of the Law: Images of Chinese Buddhism 850-1850*, University of Kansas, 1994, 183-212.
8. Marsha Weidner and others, *Latter Days of the Law: Images of Chinese Buddhism 850-1850*, University of Kansas, 1994, 262-264.
9. Janet Baker, "Foreigners in Early Chinese Buddhist Art," 68-87.
10. Phoenix Art Museum, *Heritage of the Brush: The Roy and Marilyn Papp Collection of Chinese Painting*, Phoenix Art Museum, 1989, 30.
11. Richard K. Kent, "Depictions," 193-199.
12. Marsha Weidner, *Latter Days of the Law*, 366-371.
13. Marsha Weidner, *Latter Days of the Law*, 374-377.