

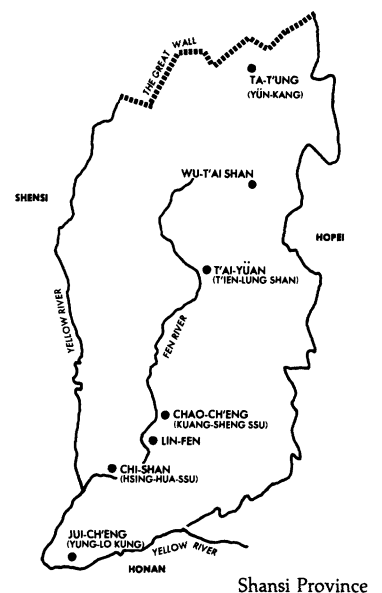
Buddha and the Holy Multitude

ASCHWIN LIPPE *Research Curator of Far Eastern Art*

The province of Shansi in northern China is strategically located between Inner Mongolia and the capital province of Hopei. To the north it is bordered by the Great Wall; to the west and south the Yellow River forms a natural boundary. Down the middle cuts the Fen River, passing by the capital T'ai-yüan, and joining the Yellow River a little to the north of the great bend where the mighty river turns east to roll across the plains toward the sea. Shansi itself is largely an upland plateau, fertile and rich in minerals (particularly coal, which the Chinese were the first to mine and use), but so arid that it has never been as prosperous as some other parts of the country. Nonetheless, of all China it is the region most rich in monuments of Buddhist art. In the north, near the Great Wall, there are the famous Yün-kang caves of the fifth century A.D., and in the center of the province the cave temples of T'ien-lung shan, dating from the sixth to eighth centuries; the sculpture of both is represented by splendid examples in the Museum. Between these two sites rises the picturesque Wu-t'ai shan, crowned by temples and monasteries, one of the holy mountains of Chinese Buddhism. The hills and valleys throughout the province shelter many old temples, the earliest dating from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a period of intense Buddhist activity in northern China supported by the foreign dynasties Liao and Chin. Those temples that escaped the ravages of floods and civil wars are the main source of the numerous sculptures in wood that have found their way to Europe and America – many outstanding ones, again, to this museum.

As a result of studies and travels in Shansi, Laurence Sickman in 1937 established the existence of a distinctive school of wall painting, containing both Buddhist and Taoist examples, which flourished along the lower reaches of the Fen River in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. The Metropolitan, in conjunction with the rebuilding of its Far Eastern galleries, has just installed a monumental Buddhist mural (Figure 3) that epitomizes the mannered, elegant approach of the Fen River artists.

The source of this painting can be reconstructed from the researches of Sickman and other scholars working in Shansi during the thirties. In 1934 both Sickman and the Chinese architectural historian Liang Ssu-ch'eng paid visits to a rich repository of



1. Lower Temple of the Kuang-sheng ssu in southwest Shansi province. Photograph: Laurence Sickman



2. Front hall of the Lower Temple. Photograph: Laurence Sickman

Buddhist art in the southwest part of the province: the Kuang-sheng ssu, or "Monastery of Vast Triumph." It is divided into two compounds. One, at the top of a hill, consists of three halls surmounted by a handsome thirteen-story pagoda of glazed brick; the other (Figure 1) at the foot of the hill near a famous holy spring, has a front hall (Figure 2) and a main hall, together with some secondary structures. The main halls in both compounds contain fine sculpture (Figure 7), and that in the Lower Temple until recently possessed a rare edition of the Tripitaka, the Buddhist canon, printed during the Chin dynasty (1115-1234). Up until the 1920s the Lower Temple halls had also contained large mural paintings, but Liang and Sickman found only a few fragments and freshly plastered walls. Liang was told that the paintings had been sold to a dealer to pay for repairs, and that they had been sent to the United States. There is little doubt as to their present whereabouts: one pair of paintings (Figure 4) came into the possession of the University Museum, Philadelphia, between 1926 and 1929; another mural (Figure 5) entered the collection of the Nelson-Atkins Gallery of Art in Kansas City in 1932; and its mate is the painting now installed at this museum. In addition, there is a fragment in the Cincinnati Art Museum that Mr. Sickman has tentatively identified as coming from the same hall as the mural in Kansas City; it apparently occupied one of the two panels on either side of the entrance. In confirmation, when two Chinese students working for Bishop William C. White in 1938 showed photographs of the Philadelphia murals to the abbot of the monastery, he recognized them, and assured his visitors that they came from the Lower Temple.

The comparative sizes of the paintings provide even more precise evidence as to their location. Each of those in Philadelphia is about eighteen feet high and thirty feet long. Parts are missing, and it may be assumed that the original length was about thirty-two feet. The paintings at Kansas City and the Metropolitan are larger—almost twenty-five feet high and fifty feet long. Fortunately Liang made ground plans of the two buildings, showing the gable

3. *The Assembly of Śaḱyamuni, from the Kuang-sheng ssu. About the second quarter of the XIV century. Water-base pigments over clay ground with mud-and-straw foundation. 24 feet 8 inches x 49 feet 7 inches. Gift of Arthur M. Sackler in honor of his parents, Isaac and Sophie Sackler, 65.29.2*

Buddhist assemblies are arranged symmetrically about a large central image of the Buddha in one of his aspects or manifestations. This figure is flanked by two major bodhisattvas, and the triad is in turn surrounded by a host of other divine, mythological, or symbolic figures. In this composition, the following figures can be tentatively identified:

CENTRAL FIGURE

A. Buddha Śaḱyamuni

MAJOR BODHISATTVAS

B. Samantabhadra

C. Mañjuśrī

OTHER BODHISATTVAS

D. Sarvanivarana-Vishḱambin

E. Aḱṣagarbha

F. Kṣhitigarbha

INDIAN GODS

G. Indra

H. Brahma

LOKAPALAS

I. Virudhaka

J. Vaiśravaṇa

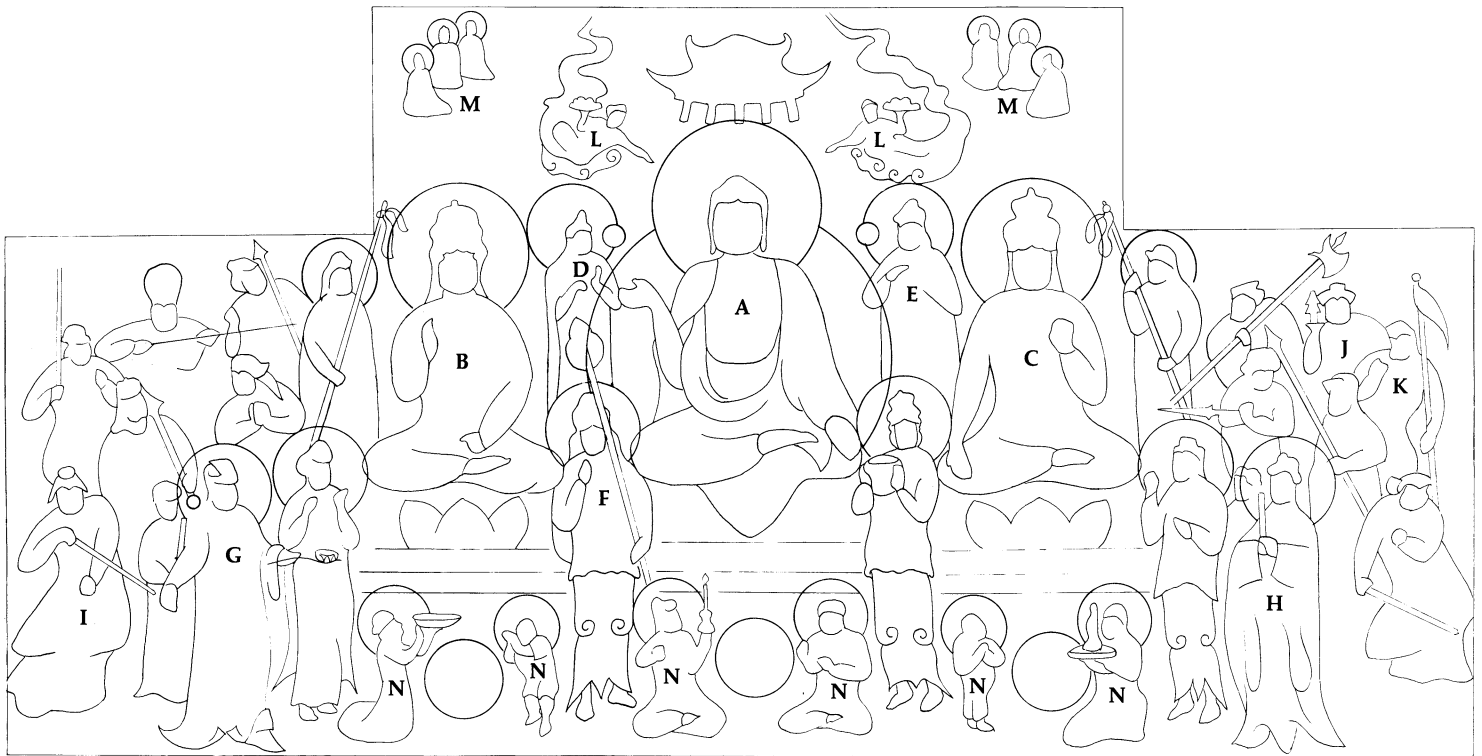
K. Virupaḱṣha

OTHER FIGURES

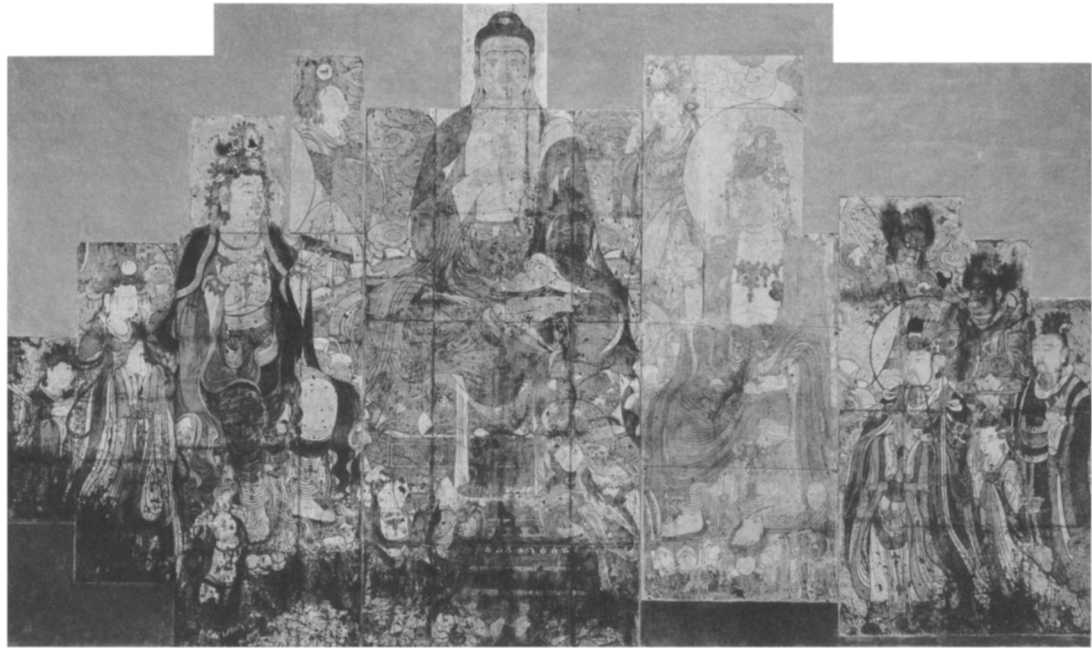
L. Apsaras

M. Buddhas of the Past

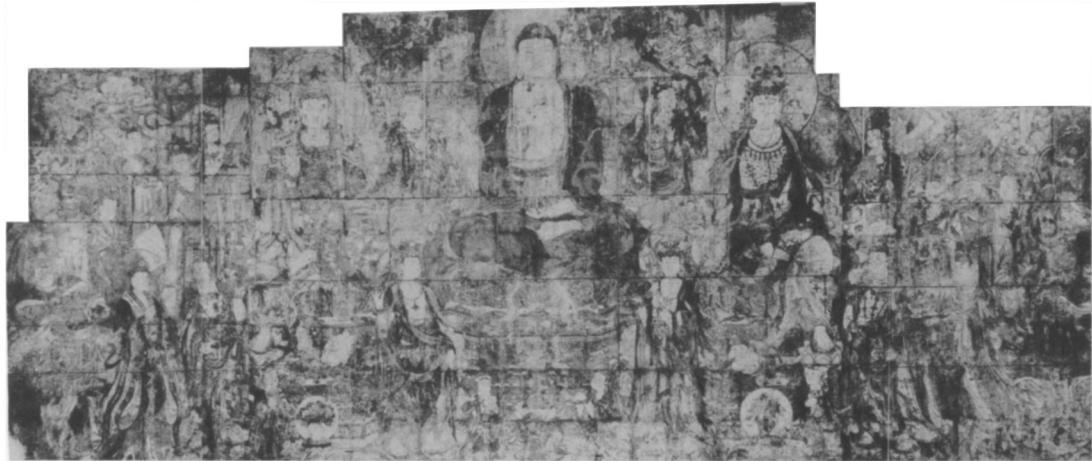
N. Worshipers



4. *The Assembly of Tejaprabha,
from the Kuang-sheng ssu.
About 18 x 30 feet. The Uni-
versity Museum, Philadelphia*



5. *The Assembly of Tejaprabha,
from the Kuang-sheng ssu.
About 25 x 50 feet.
Nelson-Atkins Gallery of Art,
Kansas City*



6. *The Assembly of Maitreya,
from the Hsing-hua ssu in
southwest Shansi. Dated 1298.
18 feet 11 inches x 38 feet 2½
inches. The Royal Ontario
Museum, University of Toronto*



walls of the front hall (Figure 2) to be about ten meters, or not quite thirty-three feet long, and those in the main hall to be about fifteen meters, or almost fifty feet long. It thus seems safe to conclude that the Philadelphia paintings were located at either end of the front hall, and the others similarly placed in the main hall.

Knowing the source of these paintings makes it possible to date them accurately, or at least to establish a *terminus post quem*. When Mr. Sickman visited the Kuang-sheng ssu, he also explored a Taoist temple, the Hall of the Water Spirit, built near the same spring as the Lower Temple. Here he found a number of wall paintings still *in situ*, and three inscriptions giving the dates 1316 and 1324. He also found a stele dated 1319, recording extensive repairs to the hall as a result of a severe earthquake in 1303, which (according to the stele) left practically nothing in the area undamaged. It thus seems probable that the Buddhist paintings were done about the same time – or certainly after the destructive earthquake.

Even if this documentary evidence did not exist, it would be possible to place these murals in time by comparing them with others from the same region. There is, for example, a painting of a Buddhist assembly (Figure 6) now in the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto: it came from the Hsing-hua ssu, or “Monastery of the Joyful Conversion,” in southwest Shansi, and an inscription, *in situ*, by the artists dates it 1298. In composition it is very much like those from the Kuang-sheng ssu, but varies slightly in style: the designs are a little simpler, the lines not quite so fluid or flamboyant. On stylistic grounds alone one would presume it to be earlier. On the other hand, there exist two sets of paintings in which the subjects are very different – they represent assemblies of Taoist divinities rather than Buddhist – but in which the same mannered kind of drawing appears. One set decorates the Yung-lo kung (“Temple of Eternal Joy”) at Jui-ch’eng, and bears the dates 1325 and 1358. The other (Figure 8), now in Toronto, comes from Lin-fen; although it has been dated only within the Yüan dynasty (1260-1368), the first half

of the fourteenth century seems more likely than the last half of the thirteenth. Unfortunately there is a long gap in time between all these paintings and the next dated group – that in the Fa-hai ssu, or “Monastery of the Ocean of Law,” west of Peking. This series was executed from 1439 to 1443, and employs a markedly different style and technique, involving much raised and gilded gesso decoration.

From all the information available, we can assume that the four paintings from the Kuang-sheng ssu are of the first half of the fourteenth century, and probably of the second quarter. There is a slight possibility that they could have been done later in the fourteenth century, but little or no chance that they existed before the earthquake of 1303.

These murals were painted by craftsmen whose profession was hereditary. Genealogical lists of such craftsmen’s families have been discovered, and a few of their works are even signed. The technique they used is not true fresco: that is, the ground was not wet plaster. Instead, the walls were built up with mud and chopped straw, and surfaced with a smoother coat of clay. The outlines of the designs were sketched in charcoal, and drawn over in thick black ink – a task probably carried out by the master. The colors were then filled in by apprentices, using mineral and vegetable pigments mixed with glue and water. The process is a rather simple one, vigorous rather than subtle, and relies for its effect on boldness of line and color.

These artisans specialized in religious art, and never aspired to equal the masterpieces of secular scroll painting of the same period, created by highly individualistic artists and scholars of the upper class who did not much care for popular religion. There are, as a matter of fact, a small number of Taoist murals that do reflect the influence of contemporary scroll painting. The series in the Hall of the Water Spirit belongs to this group. Such works are *narrative* in conception and show gods, demons, and men mingling in happy familiarity in three-dimensional settings. The Buddhist assemblies, by contrast, and the similar Taoist processions as well, are essentially *abstract*:



7. *Samantabhadra, holding a book. Statue in the main hall of the Lower Temple at the Kuang-sheng ssu. XIV century. Clay. Photograph: Laurence Sickman*

8. *Detail of the Taoist Assembly of the Southern Dipper, from Lin-fen. XIV century. Dimensions of whole 10 feet 5 inches x 34 feet 1 inch. The Royal Ontario Museum, University of Toronto*





9. *The bodhisattva Manjuśri, in the Metropolitan mural*

OPPOSITE:

10. *The central Buddha, Śakyamuni*

11. *The bodhisattva Samantabhadra*



complex, formal compositions of symbolic figures, all placed and posed according to their roles in the pantheon. In the Buddhist paintings, this is partly due to the nature of Mahayana Buddhism itself, which is complex, formal, and highly symbolic. These murals were intended to provide largely illiterate believers with a visual reflection of Mahayana metaphysics. But the specific function they served in the temple also affected their style. They were not, in this period, the principal objects of devotion, but were designed as a background for sculpture; they therefore tend to appear more decorative than illustrative.

The most popular subjects for such Buddhist paintings were views of paradise, or of the Buddha in one of his numerous manifestations, accompanied by a host of attendant divinities and followers. Many murals must once have existed, but so few temples have escaped the ravages of violence, catastrophe, and time that today they are very rare. There are enough similarities in the surviving examples from the Fen River region, nevertheless, to suggest common sources: printed pattern books or some other widely circulated models. These patterns would have supplied the artists with much of the vocabulary for their compositions, from the correct placement of the figures right down to details of gesture and attribute.

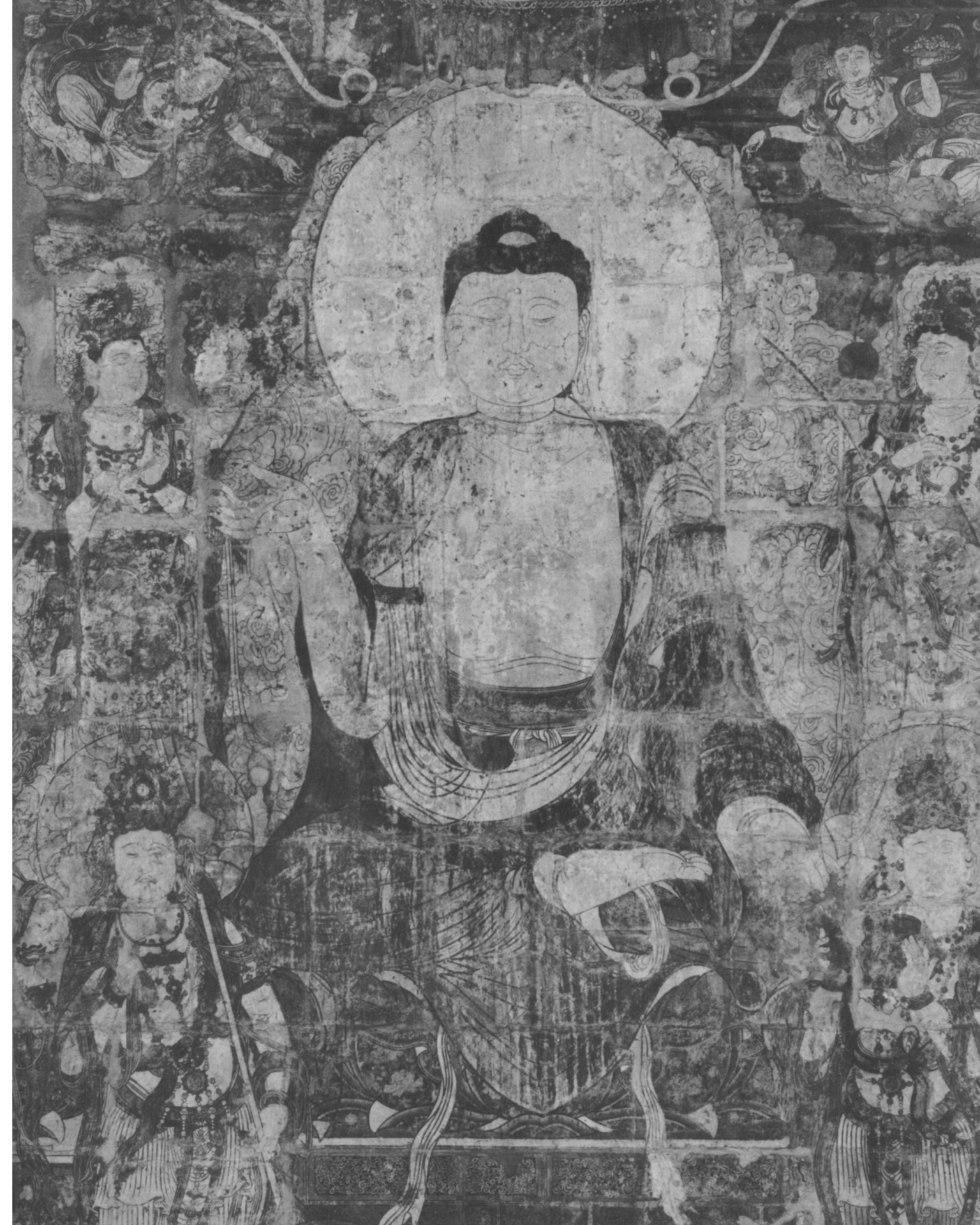
It is not unlikely that the patterns influenced the distinctive style of painting as well. Most of the works of this period and area share a quality that recalls the Western term *baroque*. The drawing compensates for flatness and lack of depth with an exuberance of flowing line and rich ornament. The figure style is what is called in Chinese, very expressively, “scudding clouds and running water.” The faces are round, the hands plump, the bodies tending toward obesity. The background is filled with billowing clouds that seem to have the consistency of dumplings. Garments are heavily bejeweled, and folds defined in sweeping, parallel curves of a type called “iron wire.” About the knees these curves become an almost abstract pattern of concentric circles, and the ends of ties, sleeves, and scarves flutter nervously away from the body in a series of S-

shaped curls. The luxuriance of the drawing is kept in check, however, by the symmetry and formality of the composition as a whole, giving the work a pleasing balance and grace. For all the dramatic qualities of line and color, the overall impression is of grandeur and serenity.

Stylistically, the four paintings from the Kuang-sheng ssu are so close to one another that many of their parts are virtually interchangeable (compare Figures 14 and 15). Each is composed in much the same way: on either side of the central Buddha sits a bodhisattva, or Buddha-to-be – one of the semi-divine beings who serve as intercessors and saviors to mankind. This triad is in turn surrounded by other bodhisattvas, divinities, spirits, and worshipers, according to the specific subject of the scene.

There are, in the Mahayana system, a number of different aspects and manifestations of the Buddha, of which the historical Buddha, called in Sanskrit Śakyamuni, is only one. (Throughout this article I shall use the Sanskrit forms only.) The assemblies in these paintings each illustrate one such aspect or manifestation (two of the four – one from each pair – appear to have the same subject, as will be explained later). Since the number, position, attributes, and even gestures of the figures all have symbolic meaning, a knowledge of this symbolism should make it possible to recognize them, and through them the scenes in which they appear. Unfortunately, however, the paintings are fragmentary and often ambiguous. In some cases, the lack of scriptural reference or pictorial tradition was perhaps responsible for this ambiguity, and left room for local variants or mistakes of interpretation by priests and artists. The fact that the murals were not the principal cult objects but rather the background for sculptural icons probably contributed to their occasional vagueness. The meaning of these works is a puzzle that can be solved only by eliminating unlikely or contradictory suppositions, and we are then usually left with the most probable of several possibilities.

In only one painting – one of the pair now in Philadelphia (Figure 4) – is there a clue so



13. *The bodhisattva Akṣagarbha*



12. *The bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha*



definite as to leave no doubt about its significance. The bodhisattva on the Buddha's right holds a book, the title of which, though abbreviated, can be read as "Sutra Spoken by the Buddha, [giving] the Mantra of the Gold-Wheel Buddha-head of Great Virtue, Tejabrabha Tathagata, Which Dispels All Calamities." The central Buddha, holding the golden sun-chariot wheel that symbolizes universal sovereignty and the Law in action, can thus be identified as the Buddha Tejabrabha, whose prime function was to give protection against natural calamities, especially of celestial origin. He is called a "Buddha-head": that is, a mystical, universal aspect of absolute Buddhahood – an emanation of boundless light rather than a personal divinity such as the historical Buddha Śakyamuni or the savior Buddha Amitabha. In popular art he is shown presiding over the heavenly bodies, represented in anthropomorphic guise.

And so it is in this mural. In the foreground, near the sides, are two standing figures, one with a black (once probably red) disk in his

crown, the other with a white one. They represent the sun and moon, respectively; the attendant of the latter, moreover, carries a rabbit, also associated with the moon. Beyond the sun and his attendant we recognize the planet Jupiter, bearing a plate with three peaches. Mercury stands on the Buddha's left, in his crown a star-shaped disk containing a monkey, in his left hand a scroll. On the other side is a female figure representing Venus, who carries a *p'i-pa*, or guitar. Above and behind the sun and Jupiter are two demonic creatures with green faces: they are the "dark stars" Rahu and Ketu, so called because they are invisible (they were thought to cause eclipses). At least two other figures – Mars and Saturn – are probably missing from the outer margin; they complete the group of divinities known as the Nine Seizers – the five known planets, the sun and moon, and the two "dark stars" – and are all recorded in the Tejabrabha sutra.

Identifying the two major bodhisattvas is more difficult, and demonstrates the problems of deciphering these murals. The symmetry of



14. *The bodhisattva Sarvanivarana-Vishkambin*

the assemblies demands two bodhisattvas, but the Tejabrabha sutra mentions only one: Manjuśri, the spiritual personification of wisdom, to whom the Buddha exposes the *mantra*, or magic spell. Since a book is one of the normal attributes of Manjuśri, we might suppose the bodhisattva with the book is he. Furthermore, the bodhisattva has in his crown a disk with a small seated figure of a Buddha in meditation; this identifies him as one of the *dhyani*, or meditation, bodhisattvas, and Manjuśri is one of this group. He often appears in a triad with the Buddha Śakyamuni and the dhyani bodhisattva Samantabhadra, embodiment of universal kindness; there are several sculptures of these figures in the Kuang-sheng ssu itself. However, Manjuśri is *never* shown at the Buddha's right; he always occupies the place of honor on the left. Consequently, although it appears likely that the two bodhisattvas are indeed Manjuśri and Samantabhadra, it seems most probable that the bodhisattva holding the book is Samantabhadra. It may not be mere coincidence that

in one of the sculptural groups at the temple, roughly contemporary with the mural, Samantabhadra, riding his elephant, is also shown holding a book (Figure 7).

Perhaps there was no "classic" arrangement for Tejabrabha, a rather late arrival in the Buddhist pantheon (the earliest known Chinese representations are of the ninth century). The bodhisattvas in the Philadelphia mural are, as we have seen, borrowed from the assembly of Śakyamuni, and those in the large mural at Kansas City (Figure 5) are borrowed from a quite different composition. The subject is also Tejabrabha – the wheel in the Buddha's hand and the presence of the heavenly bodies (including all the Nine Seizers plus two other stellar deities) make it unmistakable. But on either side of the Buddha are the bodhisattvas Suryaprabha and Chandraprabha, the embodiments of sunlight and moonlight. They belong to the assembly of Bhaiśajyaguru (the Buddha of Healing) and may have been adopted here because of their relationship with celestial forces.

15. *A bodhisattva. Detail of the second wall painting at Philadelphia*





16. *The lokapala Virupakṣha*

17. *The god Indra*



That two of the four murals – one from each pair – should show the Buddha Tejaprabha is probably not accidental. If, as seems likely, they were painted after the earthquake of 1303, the protector against natural calamities would have been an obvious subject. The others cannot be so readily recognized. We can be certain only that they do *not* represent Tejaprabha, since the same scene would not appear twice in one hall (just as, in Christian art, an altarpiece showing scenes of the Passion would not contain two Crucifixions). In fact, the second, rather fragmentary painting in Philadelphia is so tantalizingly obscure that no specific interpretation can be offered with any confidence whatever.

The subject of the mural at the Metropolitan can also only be guessed at, although the nature of some of its details make the guess seem a likely one. It is composed of the usual central group of a Buddha flanked by two main bodhisattvas. This triad is surrounded by eight standing bodhisattvas, two devas (gods) with attendants, twelve martial or demonic figures, six worshipers, and, in the “sky” overhead, two apsaras, or heavenly musicians (Figure 20), and six more Buddhas. It is these six hovering Buddhas (M in diagram) that give the strongest clue to the subject. Together with the central figure (Figure 10) they almost certainly represent the Seven Buddhas of the Past: that is, the historical Buddha Śakyamuni and the six “mortal” Buddhas that were supposed to have preceded him. The assembly would then be the one of Śakyamuni.

This hypothesis is of great assistance with interpreting the remaining figures. As was explained earlier, the Buddha Śakyamuni is regularly flanked by the dhyani bodhisattvas Manjuśri (on his left) and Samantabhadra (on his right). Here the bodhisattva on the Buddha’s left (Figure 9) wears a dhyani Buddha in his crown – he is evidently Manjuśri – and the other bodhisattva (Figure 11) wears the *triratna*, or triple jewel, which is a common attribute of Samantabhadra. The jewel is surrounded by seven small Buddhas on lotus flowers, possibly a reference, again, to the Buddhas of the Past.

The eight smaller figures, interspersed in four double ranks among the central figures, are also dhyani bodhisattvas. Here the emphasis is placed on the complete group rather than upon individuals within it, and only three, in the ranks next to the Buddha, can be identified. To the Buddha's left is a bodhisattva (Figure 14) with a dhyani Buddha in his crown, holding over his shoulder a cloud-like lotus leaf on which is a red disk containing the sun bird; to his right the bodhisattva (Figure 13) has in his crown a golden *kundika*, or ambrosia flask, and holds over his shoulder the white disk of the moon. The sun and moon emblems, carried in this particular fashion, identify Akaśagarbha ("Essence of Void Space") and Sarvanivarana-vishkambhin ("Effacer of All Stains"). Below them, to the right of the Buddha's feet (Figure 12), is Kshiti-garbha, or "Matrix of the Earth," who saves all creatures from purgatory; he carries over his shoulder a long-handled golden sistrum.

In the foreground, to the left and right of the bodhisattva group, stand two figures with rather different crowns and long, flowing robes. They are devas: the Indian gods Brahma, the creator, carrying a scepter; and Indra (Figure 17), king of heaven, holding a censer. Beyond and above them in turn are twelve martial spirits, four of which are Heavenly Kings, or lokapalas – guardians of the Buddha and his realm at the four cardinal points of the universe. Two, toward the upper right, can be interpreted as Vaiśravaṇa and Virupakṣa (Figure 16), guardians of the north and west. One holds a stupa, or reliquary; the other, a smoking jewel. In the lower left is presumably the eastern guardian, Virudhaka, brandishing his sword (Figure 18). Which of the figures is the guardian of the south, Dhṛtarāshṭra, cannot be ascertained, as none of them bear his normal attribute: the *vina*, or lute. The remaining eight figures must be the fearsome Eight Classes of celestial beings, who also serve as guardians and are a standard part of the "holy multitude" or audience of Śakyamuni mentioned in the sutras. The painting is completed in the foreground by two monks and four worshipers (Figure 19) making offerings of coral and candle, flowers and fruit. Their



18. *The lokapala Virudhaka*

19. *A worshiper*



halos show they are deified, and they are perhaps meant to represent the Four Orders—monks and nuns, male and female devotees—also recorded in the sutras.

It is best not to be dogmatic about these identifications. While all the figures are especially appropriate to the Śākyamuni assembly, they appear in other scenes as well. Moreover, two important companions of Śākyamuni, his principal disciples Ananda and Kaśyapa, are not represented. The omission is perhaps intentional: it gives a more universal quality to the assembly, a quality shared by the Tejabrabha scene on the opposite wall. This universal aspect is also emphasized in the sculptures of the temple hall. Nonetheless, since so many details have been generalized, and since the hypothesis about the mural as a whole depends on the smallest figures in it (the six Buddhas in the upper corners), its interpretation must remain tentative.

It is perhaps less important to penetrate the complicated symbolism of these murals than to realize that they do have a profound meaning. In content, as in style, what might seem to the uninitiated eye free and inventive is in fact under the strict control of tradition.

It is a tribute to the anonymous artists that the vigor of their work gives life to the dignity of its subject and transcends its formal conventions.

NOTES

The relevant data about the Fen River school can be found in articles by Laurence Sickman in *Revue des Arts Asiatiques* XI (June 1937) and *Parnassus* XI (April 1939); the latter illustrates parts of the Kansas City mural. Mr. Sickman kindly put his photographs of the Kuang-sheng ssu at our disposal. The report by Liang Su-ch'eng appears in *Chung-kuo ying-tsa'o hsüeh-she hui-k'an* V (March 1935). The murals in Toronto are illustrated and described in William Charles White's *Chinese Temple Frescoes* (Toronto, 1940) and in the *Bulletin of the Royal Ontario Museum of Archaeology* no. 12 (July 1937, revised August 1950). The Philadelphia murals were published by Helen C. Fernald in *The Museum Journal* XVII (September 1926), XIX (June 1928), XX (June 1929). The data on Tejabrabha are taken from an article by Alexander C. Soper in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* LXVIII (1948). The two existing Tejabrabha sutras are reprinted in numbers 963 and 964 in Volume 19 of the Japanese edition of the Tripitaka, *Taishō-Daizōkyō*. The murals of the Yung-lo kung were published in *Yung-lo kung pi-hua hsüan-chi* (Peking, 1958). A good modern survey of existing wall paintings is by Ch'in Ling-yün in *Chung-kuo pi-hua i-shu* (Peking, 1960).

