BUDDHIST ART IN MEDIEVAL CHINA: THE ECCLESIASTICAL VIEW

Introductory Remarks: The Artist and the Artisan

One of the most striking developments in the cultural history of early medieval China is the process of individualisation that took place in various spheres of artistic activity, roughly between the end of the second and the middle of the fourth century AD. It started in two fields directly related to the production of texts: lyrical poetry and calligraphy. Around 200 AD lyrical poetry (shi 詩) as a refined expression of individual emotions took shape in the works of the 'poets of the Jian’an 建安 era' (196–220 AD), and around the same time we hear about the first great calligraphers who developed the practice of writing from a clerical skill into a highly sophisticated art. In both cases the practice of these arts was limited to the highly educated elite, at which level they became individualized and 'upgraded'. In this way a distinction developed between, on the one hand, the ongoing production of anonymous folk songs and the humble métier of clerks, and, on the other hand, the works of individual masters known by name and admired in literati circles.

Somewhat later—in any case already in the third century AD—something similar has happened in the field of painting. The historical records contain some bits of information about the earliest 'masters', many of whom also belonged to the small elite of courtiers, scholar-officials and members of leading families. In the fourth century the high art of painting had become so well-established that the first treatises about its theory and practice were composed, and soon afterwards we hear about the first private collections of painting and calligraphy. Here, again, a new type of artistic perception and appreciation had come into being: the great work of painting had come to be conceived of as the individual creation of a great master, an expression of his personal feelings in his own style. It was contrasted with the labour of the 'painting workmen' (huagong 畫工), the craftsmen who patiently went on decorating the walls of palaces, temples and tombs with their standardized and anonymous images. The dividing line between high art and artisanal production became sharp and clear: the learned treatises on painting written by connoisseurs are
almost exclusively devoted to the lives, characters, personal styles and works of famous masters, and hardly ever touch upon the products of artisan painting.

To some extent, the two levels differed from each other by their spheres of application (gentlemen-painters would never decorate tombs, as artisans did), and by the materials used (the most prestigious types of elite paintings being done on horizontal silk rolls). There also were distinctions in respect to subject matter, as elite painting covered a wider range of themes, often with a strong literary flavour, and there certainly were stylistic differences, the most important one being the use of calligraphic brushwork in elite painting.

Buddhist art came to cover both worlds, for right from the beginning literati painters occasionally devoted themselves to Buddhist subjects, and some of them owed their fame as much to the large-scale wall-paintings which they executed in Buddhist temples as to the more intimate works which they produced on silk. Thus, within the precinct of the large monastery high art and common craft coexisted, for Buddhist temples, monasteries and cave-shrines at the same time perpetuated the Indian and Central Asian tradition of cult images and wall-paintings executed by professional artisans.

There is no reason to suppose that aesthetic considerations did not play a role when the clerical authorities asked a famous master to paint a religious scene on a temple wall (or, in some rare but well-attested cases, to make cult images of bronze or stone); the invitation to do so may also have been prompted by more down-to-earth considerations such as the prestige of the monastery and the number of visitors who would be attracted by such masterpieces.

However, if we read the ‘clerical record’—the many passages dealing with what we call ‘Buddhist art’ in specifically Buddhist sources—we are struck by the fact that in those sources the aesthetic element only plays a minimal role. To the learned monks who compiled such texts representations of Buddhas, bodhisattvas and other saintly figures were, first and foremost, religious icons with well-defined functions in worship, liturgy and meditation. Statues and painted icons were there to serve as objects of devotion; as concrete demonstrations of the donor’s piety; as means to accumulate karmic merit for oneself and for others, and as aids in practising certain types of mental concentration; they also often were believed to be endowed with protective power and other supernatural qualities. Formal beauty is seldom stressed in the Buddhist sources, and virtually