AN EXPERIMENT IN DIGITAL RECONSTRUCTION WITH A MANICHAEAN BOOK PAINTING: *THE WORK OF THE RELIGION SCENE* (MIK III 4974 RECTO)

ZSUZSANNA GULÁCSI

Flagstaff

Digital technology can make an important contribution to art historical studies of severely damaged works of art. In cases where scholarship leads to an understanding of the original iconography, composition, or style, a verbal description of the discoveries may not be enough. A digitally produced illustration can show the research findings effectively. While the resulting computer image could never replace the work of art itself, it can capture a new understanding about the object, and thus increase its relevance as a visual source. Although growing in relevance, so far this new technology has been employed relatively rarely in connection with art history. The reasons are numerous. Art historians dealing with early remains are accustomed to decay. Damage is part of the objects we study. At the same time, the attention of modern art history tends to focus less on the object itself and more on the interpretations of its meaning and context. A further obstacle is hidden in the digital work itself, which requires significant infrastructure, technical know-how,
and is as time-consuming as it is costly. Therefore, it is not surprising that the current art historical literature on digital subjects does not deal with digital reconstructions. Nevertheless, more and more works of art are subjected to virtual makeovers based on art historical research. The best known examples include the faded Mayan murals from the 15th century at Bonampak in Mexico, the digitally reconstructed photographs of which grew out from a National Geographic project (1995); the 3D computer images of the Byodo-in Buddhist temple in Japan, which show the original painted decoration of the 950-year old wooden building (2000); and an ongoing project at the Center for the Arts of East Asia (University of Chicago) that set out to reconstruct the Buddhist caves from the Northern Qi Dynasty (550–577 CE) at Xiangtangshan in China, and will show the 3D digital results at an exhibition in the Smart Museum of Art (2008).

This paper is an experiment that combines digital imaging and art historical research. It documents the stages of the computer work and discusses the art historical reasons behind it. Although it would be possible to write solely on the technological side of this project, the goal here is not technical in nature. Instead, my attention remains on recording the process and the reasons that result in a digitally reconstructed work of art.

The reconstruction itself centers on a Manichaean book painting from East Central Asia that dates from ca. the 10th century CE. This small scale image, measuring 6.6 cm in height and 6.1 cm in width, constitutes an intratextual miniature on the recto of a codex folio (MIK III 4974) that belongs to the collection of the Museum für Indische Kunst, Berlin (Fig. 1 and Color Plate 1a). The painting is embedded in a clearly legible Middle Persian language benediction on the sacred meal and the leadership of the Manichaean community, written in Manichaean script continuously across the two pages of the folio. Known as the Work of the Religion Scene, the image on this paper fragment has been

---

1 Greenhalgh 2004.
2 Miller 1995, 50–69.
5 For a technical discussion of the rebuilding and recreating of images, see Eismann 2006, esp. 236–74.