

Painting the Void: Chan Buddhism in Guanxiu's Eighteen Luohan (Arhats)

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Though many religious traditions find complement, representation, and focus in artistic practice, there is perhaps no more fitting example of the interconnected lifeblood of the two disciplines than Chinese painter Guanxiu's *Eighteen Luohan*. Composed by a Chan Buddhist master acting on inspiration imparted to him through divine dreams, this series of eighteen hanging scrolls is both a depiction of great spiritual masters and an invitation to join their ranks. A departure in style from previous Chan works, *Eighteen Luohan* displays in ink and light color each of the eighteen named followers of the Buddha in a moment of repose in nature. Each occupies his own silk hanging scroll and is pictured performing a different meditative practice, composing his limbs in a symbolic mudra or reading a bit of sacred script. In seeming stark contrast to their restful bodily positions, the enlightened masters bear the marks of lives of strict ascetic devotion to the Buddha; their limbs are scarred and hobbled, with their thin skin stretched tightly over worn bones. Rather than inviting pity or scorn, these wasted figures, so contrary to contemporary ideals of beauty, are meant to inspire their viewers. Though not considered a sacred text or image, *Eighteen Luohan* serves as sublime meditation nonetheless, providing a throughway from the artist's immense spiritual power to that of his subjects in a warm, optimistic embrace of the Buddha spirit and all who seek to realize it.

Guanxiu, originally called Jiang Guanxiu, was born in Jinhua, Zhejiang Province in 832 A.D. He entered a Chan monastery as a young child and, as per Buddhist custom, dropped his family name in a gesture indicating his renunciation of earthly ways and aspiration to understand more perfectly the Dharma, or the teaching of the Buddha. Like all adopted Dharma names, the

name Guanxiu bears a symbolic, aspirational connotation meant to inspire its bearer to greater spiritual heights; it means “stream of blessings.”¹ Later in life, Guanxiu moved to the Shu-Han capital Chengdu and earned a position in the court of the Shu prince Wang Jian. He served with such distinction in that position and demonstrated such spiritual mastery that he was granted the honorary title “Chanyue Dashi,” or “Great Master Meditation Moon,” and presented with a purple robe, a ceremonial gift offered only to high-level monks.² While in court, Guanxiu studied painting under Yan Liben and made a name for himself as a master of poetry, drawing, and cursive writing in the *caoshu* (cursive) style. In 880, inspired by his Buddhist training and a series of meditative dreams, Guanxiu began to paint a series of ten arhats, which were the legendary original disciples of the Buddha. This initial series of ten images formed the basis of what would eventually be eighteen distinct hanging scrolls and the cornerstone of Guanxiu’s legacy.

Guanxiu was not the first to paint a series of arhats, nor would he be the last. The tradition hails from Indian Buddhist tradition, which holds that the arhats were the Buddha Sakyamuni’s original disciples, enlightened through their own efforts and endowed with transcendent wisdom. Their function, as assigned by the Buddha himself, was to protect the Dharma until the coming of Maitreya, the future Buddha.³ These original arhats were also ordered to become *futian*, or “fields of merit,” “so that people [could] garner great merit through their virtuous acts.”⁴ Originally composed of sixteen members, the original group of arhats received offerings made by lay Buddhists to monks, monasteries, or the Buddha and ensured the donors received their due benefits. Clearly, the arhats played an essential mediating role for aspiring Buddhist masters, offering up good deeds on their behalf and ensuring proper heavenly communication. It is natural, then, that Buddhist artists all across the world would be moved to paint the spiritual masters whose very existence helped them along their spiritual journey. Unfortunately for medieval Chinese artists, however, when they first learned

- 1 Dawn Haney, “What’s in a Dharma Name?,” *Buddhist Peace Fellowship*, December 11, 2012, accessed October 20, 2018, <http://www.buddhistpeacefellowship.org/whats-in-a-dharma-name/>.
- 2 Candana Karuna, “The Tradition of Buddha’s Robe,” *Chinese Buddhist Encyclopedia*, accessed October 29, 2018, www.chinabuddhismencyclopedia.com/en/index.php/The_Tradition_of_Buddha's_Robe.
- 3 Stephen Little, “The Arhats in China and Tibet,” *Artibus Asiae*, vol. 52, no. 3 (1992): 255.
- 4 Bong Seok Joo, “The Arhat Cult in China from the Seventh through Thirteenth Centuries: Narrative, Art, Space and Ritual” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2007), 52.

of the legend of the arhats, they received very little information about the identities of the sixteen masters in question. This left devoted artists with little choice but to fill in the gaps with their own cultural tradition, imbuing the arhats with Confucian and conventional Chinese morals.⁵ Though they were depicted widely throughout the Tang Dynasty, the sixteen arhats were not assigned names until the monk Xuanzang translated *A Record of the Perpetuity of the Dharma* from Sanskrit into Chinese.

Had Guanxiu lived in India instead of China, his series of arhat paintings would almost certainly have been capped at sixteen. In China, however, traditional canon allowed for two other assemblies of Buddhist masters not acknowledged in other parts of the world. The first grouping of arhats to differ from the characterization in *A Record of the Perpetuity of the Dharma*, the 500 arhats, “[represented] a large crowd of unspecified arhats” and was never a feasible number of portraits to paint.⁶ Evidently, the number 500 was frequently used in Buddhist teachings to signify a large gathering of any number of objects, inanimate or living. Besides that, there was no reason for Guanxiu to attempt to depict so many figures as there was no specific reference to the 500 being part of the initial group of arhats designated by the Buddha to protect the Dharma. The question remains, then, where the last two figures in Guanxiu’s series came from. The earliest mention of a painting of eighteen arhats can be found in Su Shi’s poem “Song for the Eighteen Arhats Painting of Zhang of Jinshui,” but even that work does not indicate the origin of the mysterious final two *luohan*.⁷ Some scholars have suggested that, since they are frequently depicted subduing Daoist symbols such as tigers and dragons, the inclusion of the seventeenth and eighteenth arhats is a veiled assertion of the superiority of Buddhism over Daoism.⁸ Not only does this seem like a somewhat aggressive stance for such a solemn art piece to take, it also seems unlikely to be the true explanation of the inclusion of the last two masters, as dragons and tigers also appeared in works featuring only sixteen arhats. Marinus Willem de Visser offers an alternative explanation, suggesting that the increase to eighteen *luohan* references the significance of the number nine in Daoist tradition, while Thomas Watters proposes the change was made in allusion to the Tang

5 Ibid., iii.

6 Ibid., 112.

7 Ibid., 121.

8 Ibid., 127.

Dynasty organizational practice of grouping eighteen scholars together to study.⁹ Perhaps the most reasonable explanation for Guanxiu's inclusion of two extra *luohan* is his own. Having no canonical descriptions of the arhats to paint from, Guanxiu was forced to come up with his own reference images. Rather than use human models to approximate the divine spirituality of his subjects, Guanxiu turned directly to his subjects, praying that they reveal themselves to him in dreams; according to *The Song Biographies of Eminent Monks*, “[Guanxiu] said that whenever drawing each honorable one, [he] had to pray to have the true appearance of the arhat in his dream. Only then was [he] able to accomplish this.”¹⁰ It has also been said that the arhats approached Guanxiu of their own volition, having been informed of his artistic and spiritual mastery. Though the appearance of the arhats was unknown to his contemporaries, Guanxiu was able to capture what is now accepted as the likeness of the arhats through intense spiritual communion and meditation. Given the unconventional circumstances under which Guanxiu created his work, it might be most accurate to say that he painted eighteen arhats not for any secular or political reason, but rather because eighteen, rather than sixteen, figures appeared to him in his dreams and called out to be painted.

To appreciate fully Guanxiu's great spiritual and artistic achievement, it is necessary to understand Chan Buddhism, the religious foundation of his life and work. Chan Buddhism, which rose to prominence in China beginning in the 6th century, is a pursuit of fundamental, universal understanding characterized by meditation, contemplation, and immersion. Devotees seek enlightenment through introspection, opening themselves up to the essence of things. According to the master Dōgen Kigen, “to learn the Buddhist way is to learn about oneself. To learn about oneself is to forget oneself. To forget oneself is to perceive oneself as all things. To realize this is to cast off the body and mind of self and others.”¹¹ In theory, meditation constitutes an attempt to experience one's own identity in absolute harmony with that of the Buddha. The waking tranquility of a meditative posture is reflective of this communion with the Buddha nature; in the same way that a practicing monk finds balance between a waking and a relaxed mind, so he must also

9 Ibid., 128.

10 Qtd. in Ibid., 88.

11 Qtd. in Helmut Brinker and Hiroshi Kanazawa, “Zen Masters of Meditation in Images and Writings,” *Artibus Asiae* 40 (1996): 11.

seek understanding of his own identity in union with the Buddha. Given that meditation is such a cornerstone of Buddhist practice, it is unsurprising that all eighteen arhats in Guanxiu's series are painted in moments of reflective repose. Their faces are peaceful; their bodies arranged among rocks and trees in traditional meditative poses. Some display mudras, or symbolic gestures of the hands and bodies, to further facilitate their spiritual communion with the Buddha. Compositionally, the arhats tend to occupy roughly half of the hanging scrolls on which they are painted, seeming to indicate their realization of balance and tranquility between themselves and their environment. Their eyes are closed to the physical world but open to the spiritual one, and the implication of their restful expressions is an immense peace with oneself and the universe.

A sect of Mahāyāna Buddhism, Chan thinking holds that theory and intellect cannot lead to enlightenment, because they ignore the spiritual in pursuit of mastery of the physical and analytical—neither of which are conducive to true, transcendent openness to the world. Intellect concerns itself with the exterior world and its machinations, whereas Chan Buddhist meditation is directed towards the interior of all things. This rejection of the concrete and exterior precludes adherence to religious documents or doctrine, as transmission of truth is regarded to be an intensely personal, and therefore interior, act. Chan Buddhism can consequently never be taught; the best masters can only point to the mind of their students and hope their example of enlightened practice makes clear the path to true immersion with the world. This passing on of personal religious experience from master to student cannot be undertaken verbally, though of course there exist verbal cues to spur on enlightenment. One such method of masterful encouragement is the *gong'an*, or “magistrate’s table,” a paradoxical spiritual quandary meant to inspire enlightened thinking. According to one prompt, a monk asks his master, “Whenever one has a question, one’s mind feels confused. How is that so?” To which the master replies, “kill, kill!”¹² These puzzles cannot be understood by rational thought, which, as previously mentioned, is antithetical to the kind of holistic, all-encompassing immersion that enlightenment requires. In keeping with the anti-textual nature of Chan Buddhism, few of the painted arhats are pictured meditating with written aid. Rather, they sit in the solitude of their own minds and their own hanging scrolls, traveling the winding, deeply personal road to enlightenment

12 Ibid., 14.

without significant external aid. They are alone both compositionally and mentally, their meditation largely unhindered by physical distraction. Of course, since meditative tools and resources are not forbidden to Buddhist practitioners, some pictured masters, like the Angaja arhat, are depicted holding scriptures, rosaries, fans, and walking staffs. The idea behind the rejection of such objects and texts is merely that no Buddhist should rely on external or verbal stimuli to attain internal and abstract understanding.

This emphasis on strictly anti-logical, anti-verbal meditation has inspired many Chan Buddhists through the ages to turn to visual art, which also exists in the inexplicable liminal space between word and meaning. Thus, the Chan art object serves as a simile or metaphor, a vessel of spiritual communion, an attempt to render comprehensible the incomprehensible by nonverbal means of pictures. Chan art requires “silent, patient self-absorption” from the viewer, because it expresses a worldview experienced from within.¹³ Upon closer inspection, everyday objects reveal a lofty spirituality, as Chan Buddhism affirms the importance and innate beauty of even the most mundane item. The goal of a work of Chan art is to unveil mysteries that cannot be put into words, and the goal of a Chan artist is to become one with the subject at hand: “To become a bamboo and to forget that you are one with it while drawing it—this is the Zen of the Bamboo,” writes Daisetsu Teitarō Suzuki.¹⁴ In a way, then, the lengthy process of composing the series of arhats enhances Guanxiu’s connection with the divine. No doubt the act of praying, dreaming, and writing the piece allowed the artist ample time to contemplate his being and the Buddha spirit, and achieve greater spiritual mastery. In a historical sense, too, creating *Eighteen Luohan* allowed Guanxiu to become one with his subject matter, as his portrayal of the arhats has become definitive and his name has become synonymous with the work; to say “eighteen *luohan*” is to think of Guanxiu and to say “Guanxiu” is to think of the arhats. This idea of becoming one with the subject of meditation or artistic practice is not uniquely Chan; in fact, it represents a profound meeting of Chan, Daoist, and Confucian ideas brought about by the overlap between monastic, noble, literati, and imperial Chinese art traditions. According to Daoist thought, the Dao resides in all things and manifests itself everywhere, composing a “doctrine without words”

13 Ibid., 11.

14 Qtd. in Ibid., 18.

that lends itself well to Chan artistic production.¹⁵

Given the abstract, fluid nature of the Chan understanding of the world, it is unsurprising that there is no definitive Chan artistic style or iconographic canon. Largely free of formal rules or restrictions, Chan artistic practice encourages artlessness as a reflection of communion with inner truth. On principle, Chan art should be simple, objective, pure, and respectful of nature; the Japanese Chan master Shin'ichi Hisamatsu posits seven qualities that define Chan art: asymmetry, simplicity, unadorned loftiness, spontaneity, spiritual depth, unworldliness, inner serenity.¹⁶ Though perhaps unintentionally, Guanxiu's *Eighteen Luohan* conforms to all of these principles. The masters tend to be located in the corners or towards the sides of their respective hanging scrolls, achieving the requisite asymmetry, and their minimal use of color and line reflects a simplicity and unadorned quality. More striking than their compositional qualities, however, are the arhats' spiritual depth. As divine beings whose very appearance is unknown on Earth, the arhats are truly not of this world, as though they have never existed in it. They have, in a sense, so masterfully immersed themselves in the spiritual realm that they have managed to completely avoid contact with the spiritual world. Even the painted arhats' origin in Guanxiu's mind contributes to their otherworldliness; having appeared to the artist in a dream, they may be said to reside in the subconscious, rather than in the physical world. Scholars and even some of Guanxiu's contemporaries have posited that the *luohan*, with their "thick eyebrows and big-eyes, elongated jaw and voluminous nose... [have] the appearance of barbarians" or foreigners, to which observation the artist responded that "[those are what] he saw from his dream."¹⁷ Of course, the assumption of foreignness is only partially correct. While the *luohan* do indeed hail from somewhere other than China, their true, otherworldly provenance is profoundly outside of the scope of unenlightened human imagination.

In contrast to the loftiness of its subject matter, Chinese religious painting tends to deemphasize formal symbols as seen in Western art in an effort to embrace the beauty and spirituality of everyday objects. Indeed, Guanxiu's arhats are far from divinely beautiful. In contrast to the religious artworks of his contemporaries, Guanxiu's work does not pay homage to secular

15 Ibid., 17.

16 Ibid., 38.

17 *The Record of Famous Painters of Yizhou*, qtd. in Joo, "The Arhat Cult in China," 86.

beauty standards, attempting instead to inject his images with a spiritual element. His arhats do not display the physical marks of the cultural elite in conformation with their society's physical ideals; rather, the *luohan* appear gaunt and sickly and are clothed unfashionably. The grotesqueness of the arhats' bodies emphasizes the goodness within—their unhealthy and wasted bodies displaying the outward result of intense spiritual effort. The hollow cheekbones, overgrown eyebrows, exposed ribcages, and knobby limbs of the figures reflect long lives of asceticism and stoicism spent fasting, meditating, and resisting temptation. Clearly, rejection of the physical world can take a heavy toll on the body that has been transcended. Since any normal human would likely be unable to sustain a harshly ascetic lifestyle to the point of such physical deprivation, the arhats' degradation emphasizes their otherworldly spiritual devotion. So enlightened are the *luohan* that they resemble the Buddha even in appearance, with their elongated earlobes, flowing robes, and mudras all recalling traditional depictions of the Buddha. By societal standards, their bodies are remarkable solely in their ugliness, but that is only because their religious mastery has necessitated a separation from earthly ways and a lean into the spiritual realm.

As indicated by its focus on unpacking the spirituality of the seemingly mundane, Chan art is rarely intended to establish contact between the mortal and the divine; rather, it tends to serve as effigy, admonition, stimulant, seal, or general expression of ideology. So strong is some Chan Buddhists' aversion to using specific texts and images as religious objects that some monks destroy their own written records. Questioning the use of sacred images and texts is not seen as iconoclasm in the Chan tradition, but rather as a thoughtful deconstruction of misguided attempts to render concrete the ephemeral and otherworldly. Accordingly, images should focus on human masters of meditation, rather than such transcendent beings as the Buddha. Old masterpieces, then, are intended not as images to be worshipped, but rather as a means to attempt unity with the masters who painted them and perhaps gain insight into their enlightened ways of thinking. Thus, Guanxiu's series of arhat paintings is not intended to serve as an object of worship; rather, it is meant to help lay Buddhists focus their thoughts and achieve a greater understanding of their own faith. As previously stated, even the best masters can do nothing more than point their students towards enlightenment and equip them with meditative tools to guide them on their individual path. The pictured *luohan* are, indeed, the best masters of Chan

Buddhism that exist, and as such, they can do no better as instructors than to appear to the faithful, as in Guanxiu's dreams, and show them the way to enlightenment. With the great artist's help, the arhats are able to fulfill their mediating role between Buddha and mankind even more perfectly, as their renewed corporeal presence on earth allows them to continue influencing and inspiring lay Buddhists. Guanxiu's art, then, is a sort of visual signpost enhancing believers' connection to the universe by facilitating contact with the original arhats. This communion-by-proxy reflects an understanding of art-making as a simultaneously discrete and continuous process, wherein the product of a moment of creation is clearly in existence (implying the completion of said act), but the experience of perceiving the piece in a specific instant in time and the spontaneity of its brushwork constantly breathes life into it anew.

As to the formal components of Chan painting, along with style and content, much is left to the discretion of the artist. Though there are no set guidelines, many portraits of Chan masters make use of black ink and blank white backgrounds. Sometimes, in pursuit of maximal fidelity to representation, Chan Buddhist artists will incorporate light color into their pieces, as is the case with Guanxiu's arhats. As befitting the intention of the work, it makes logical sense that Guanxiu, having prayed, meditated, and dreamed on the true appearances of the legendary *luohan*, would utilize all formal methods at his disposal to realize the subjects of his visions on silk. Also, in keeping with Chan painting norms, Guanxiu's work features natural elements in the background. Surrounded by trees and stones, the eighteen arhats are at peace with themselves and their environments, paradoxically having transcended the physical world while being fully present in both their bodies and the natural world. Some scholars have postulated that Guanxiu added the natural backgrounds to his work after having seen other popular arhat images in Sichuan.¹⁸ Even without the inclusion of trees, however, Guanxiu's series would still conform to Chan art ideals in its retention of large areas of blank white silk. Rather than being negative space without meaning, the un-inked white page in Chan art represents the incalculable void. Emptiness of being, a prerequisite for understanding the self and reaching enlightenment, is an essential aspect of Buddhist reflection, which means that white space is equally important to painted portions of Chan artworks; according to Donald Keene, "the two worlds, the material and

18 Ibid., 91.

the non-material [represented by ink and its lack, respectively], are both essential.”¹⁹ As previously mentioned, even with the addition of the natural backgrounds, the *luohan* occupy only half of the scrolls on which they are painted. This leaves plenty of room for contemplation of the Buddha nature with which Chan practitioners seek communion, understood as the “absolute void,” an “open expanse, empty and bright.”²⁰ The tranquil expressions of the arhats has already been noted, but that enlightened stillness is amplified by proximity to the void; though they are surrounded by what can only be described as the incalculable mystery of eternity, the *luohan* smile gently, their minds and bodies at one with their surroundings both metaphysically and in terms of artistic style. Many Chan artworks further evoke the void through their use of flying white, which appears as fleeting fragments of white paper left untouched by dry, distressed brushstrokes, the void and substance locked by a flick of ink into a continuous dialogue. In a world of division and intellect, the flying white serves as a reminder of the possibility of union and intuition. Even the solid lines delineating the subject take on new life, their fluidity and wetness seeming to imply the ultimate lack of division among things; only thin strokes of ink separate the masters from the void, yet they remain resolute and calm.

The simplicity of the interplay between black ink and white page denounces splendor and evokes the void, emphasizing naturalness, accidentalness, and internality. Flowing ink washes, and broad, swift strokes (including broken ink and splashed ink techniques) express the spontaneity and honesty inherent in traditional Chan Buddhism while simultaneously allowing the expression of immediate and fleeting thoughts. Guanxiu takes a slightly different approach. His strokes are decorative, intricate, and delicate, and as in all *gongbi*, it is clear that the figures have been written with painstaking precision. It took fourteen years for the master artist to complete his series of eighteen *luohan*, and that expanded timeframe is clearly visible in the intricacy of the final product. The care with which their bodies have been inked indicates that the pictured arhats did not achieve enlightenment in an instant, as a more *xieyi* or freehand approach might have suggested. Rather, one can imagine them remaining in meditative positions as pictured for all fourteen years of Guanxiu’s composition, undergoing great pains in their efforts to achieve complete immersion of the

19 Qtd. in Brinker and Kanazawa, “Zen Masters,” 51.

20 Ibid., 55.

self. The aforementioned emaciation of the arhats' bodies also contributes to the sense that their road to enlightenment has been paved with difficulty and suffering. In the extended timeframe of their composition is reflected the painful, lengthy process of becoming a religious master. Neither the meticulous art nor the elevated mental state it depicts were realized in an instant; in that way, the form of the art piece befits the achievement of both its subject and its creator.

Broadly, Guanxiu's work can be said to exist in the ultimate liminal space between spirituality and artistic practice. From conception, the piece was designed to bridge the gap between the spiritual world and the material, revealing the physical image of a group of masters of divinity while refusing to confine them to the burden of earthly beauty standards. In revealing the ascetic desecration of his subjects, Guanxiu reveals the inextricable link between spiritual growth and physical decay, and his alternating use of ink and blank page recalls the interplay between the corporeal world and the void (a concept which contains in itself the duality of everything and nothing). The arhats themselves represent a correspondence between the Buddha and the Buddhist, and their willingness to reveal themselves to Guanxiu in a dream implies a further link between the divine Chan masters and the earthly one. In a way, the Buddha's advocates on Earth find in Guanxiu an advocate for themselves, bringing their image to the people so that they may continue their heavenly summons to protect and promote the Dharma. Through *Eighteen Luohan*, the arhats achieve a creative partnership with the artist and a meditative participation with the viewer, culminating in a work that is pleasurable to look at and that facilitates for all involved a journey of learning, being, unlearning, and ultimately understanding.

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