

Calligraphy, Printing and Graphic Arts

Calligraphy and Decorated Manuscripts

In East Asia writing is linked particularly closely to painting. Buddhism, too, cultivated calligraphy. This is not the place to discuss the calligraphic achievements of Buddhist priests, even though they included some of the outstanding masters of calligraphy, because that would more properly be part of a history of calligraphy, the most valued and highest-ranking art form of East Asia. Buddhist epigraphic work, such as inscribed tablets on temple buildings, inscription steles, consecrating inscriptions on statues or paintings, etc., is basically similar to epigraphic work in general. Mention should, however, be made of two items which played an important role in Buddhist culture and art: the Sûtra scrolls, with their calligraphy, illustrations and decorative elements, and the symbolic-magic characters.

The sacred scriptures of the Buddhists, first and foremost among them the Sûtras, were translated in China from Sanskrit into Chinese over the course of several centuries and transmitted in handwritten copies. To produce copies of such books in one's own handwriting or to commission a calligrapher to produce a copy was considered one of the most meritorious of good works. Numerous beautiful manuscripts were produced, particularly during periods when culture flourished, and presented to temples as votive offerings. But this was not the only purpose of such copies. We have already referred (p. 83) to the fact that copies of Sûtras were placed inside cult images to bestow efficacy upon them. A different purpose was served by Sûtra copies enclosed in decorated pottery or metal tubes. These, together with Buddhist figures and cult implements, or mirrors and coins, were buried in so-called sûtra mounds in order to preserve the sacred teaching from the world catastrophe which was to accompany the imminent end of time or of the law (*mo-fa* or *mo-shih*, *mappô* or *masse*). They would then be available for the new world age when they would be proclaimed by the Buddha-to-come, Maitreya.

But Sûtra copying was by no means always limited to the texts alone, no matter how meritorious in a religious and how perfect in an aesthetic sense they may have been. The scrolls were often also elaborately decorated. Among the surviving available material, the Japanese Sûtra scrolls of the 12th century constitute perhaps the apex of this art. Not only was precious, dark (mostly blue) colored silk

or paper used, but the writing was done with golden or silver characters. All components of a Sûtra scroll--the external cover (28*), the buttons at both ends of the rolling stick, the silk ribbons, etc., and also the boxes in which they were kept--are, in material, color, and decoration, particularly splendid.

Every scroll was adorned at its beginning, immediately preceding the text, with a "frontispiece" (*J. mikaeshi-e*) (135).⁹⁷ Such frontispieces are still virtually unknown in the West. The most frequent types are drawn in gold and silver, and are predominantly linear in character, with only the most delicate application of shading. Such pictures may contain a wealth of figure groups and scenes whose precise meaning is often not easily ascertained, as there is not always a direct relationship between the picture and the contents of the particular scroll. The subjects are mostly sacred configurations of the usual kind, but they are not frozen into the usual hieratic poses and are, therefore, much livelier in appearance. We also find groups of hermits and all sorts of other figures, usually embedded in a landscape which is loosely sketched in a delicately decorative manner. The linear art of these drawings is of marvelous grace. They exude the spirit of a peaceful and joyous faith, but with that slightly melancholic touch so typical of Buddhism, and late Heian Japanese court culture in particular. These works originated in the aesthetically highly refined sphere of the court, since at that time there were no other culturally significant social strata capable of producing or subsidizing such richly developed religious art.

Very famous are the Sûtra scrolls (*Heike-Nôkyô*, 1164) which the noble Taira family donated to the Itsukushima Shintô Shrine--then still under strong Buddhist influence--on Miyajima island near Hiroshima. These scrolls reveal the true splendor of craftsmanship which the secular court lavished on these holy scriptures. They show rich gold and silver decorations and a wealth of colors, all applied with great sophistication and dignity in the purely Japanese style (the so-called *Yamato-e*, "Japanese painting," in contradistinction to *Kara-e*, the style adopted from China).⁹⁸ Only a few examples from China seem to have survived, such as the picturesque *Vimalakîrti* scene (dated 1118), done in gold on purple silk, owned by the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

The series of *kakemono* in the *Chûsonji* (north of Sendai in Northern Japan) displays a sort of pious playfulness. Its surfaces are almost entirely covered by drawings of pagodas. These drawings owe their particular charm to the fact that their lines consist of tiny golden characters of a Sûtra text. The pagodas are surrounded by colorful, loosely scattered groups of figures and landscape sketches. Even sacred figures are sometimes depicted by lines made up of written characters. Such works were also clearly intended as full-fledged votive offerings, and there is little doubt that they also existed in China.

A peculiar type of Sûtra copy should be mentioned in passing. These are the folding fans with Sûtra passages inscribed on them which have been preserved in different Japanese temples but are particularly numerous in the *Shitennôji* in Ôsaka. On each of the vertical fan stripes is written a line of the text in characters which shrink in size towards the bottom part where the fan narrows. We know that solemn rituals were performed during which large numbers of participants executed such pious writing exercises on fan paper. It may strike Westerners as peculiar that these texts would run across decorative colored drawings previously applied to the paper

surface. East Asian taste came to favor black ink calligraphy which seemed to be suspended on and in front of a surface decorated with a colored sketch. We should keep in mind that Chinese letter stationery and Japanese sheets or scrolls with poetry employed a similar device and that some of these were produced by means of woodblock printing as early as the 12th century. Such pictures had nothing to do with the sacred texts themselves, but rather consisted of highly secular and often amusing genre scenes from the life of the court nobility and commoners which may perhaps be related to contemporary tales.

Long horizontal scrolls with continuous illustrations of Sûtra texts also exist but were not too common; otherwise more copies would presumably have survived. As a matter of fact, this type is represented by only one single work, the *Kakogenzai-inga-kyô* (122), of which several incomplete scrolls have survived from several different versions, which are, however, almost identical in style. These fragments show no signs of their age, even though they are 8th-century works (one is dated 735). They are presumably Japanese, but are executed in a style adopted from the Chinese style of the Six Dynasties or early T'ang periods and may, therefore, legitimately be considered as representative of Buddhist illustrative painting in China, as is the case with respect to many other works which have been preserved in Japan. The text, written in admirable T'ang-style calligraphy, is placed in the lower register of the scrolls and narrates the life-story of the Buddha, including his earlier existences. These led him through innumerable rebirths to the level of a Bodhisattva and then to the fruition of Buddhahood after his final rebirth in our time and world. Of the words in the title, *kako* means past, *genzai* present, *inga* cause and effect, or rather "fruit" in the sense of the karma law. Above this text every scene is illustrated in a continuous undivided picture strip which shows groups of figures placed in a landscape of very little spatial depth and composed of natural elements having the appearance of stage props. This is a work of great charm and is filled with the spirit of simple faith, its "primitive" character notwithstanding.

Historically speaking, this work still belongs to the "late archaic-early classic" phase, just before the mature T'ang took the decisive step in the direction of that fully developed mode of expression which became the model or at least the point of departure for all art that followed. This unassuming and charming work is, therefore, of inestimable historical value as one of the very few surviving examples of the earliest Buddhist painting style. A few comparable pieces exist among the wall paintings and temple banners made of painted cloth found in Tun-huang. It also has special importance as representing an early phase--now almost entirely lost--of the illustrated hand-scroll (*emakimono*), with respect to the interesting manner in which its technique of composition combines the categories of space and time (see above).

Later Buddhist *emakimono* usually contain little text. They predominantly offer illustrative-narrative scenes from the history of various sects or sanctuaries and from the biographies of individual priests. They do not really belong to the art of sacred books and were, therefore, already discussed in connection with Buddhist painting (p. 127). Still, this picture type is basically a "book," and such works frequently served as votive offerings just like the Sûtra scrolls. The crucial difference between the two was that picture scrolls could not be used as sacred "instruments," i.e., as cult implements.

Writing with deliberate artistic appeal has frequently served monumental functions in Buddhist sanctuaries. The inscription tablets on temple buildings have already been mentioned (p. 85), but inside particular buildings, too, large tablets or long vertical banners with impressive, decorative writing, often done in gilded characters, can be found on pillars and walls. In temple yards or groves there are steles or pillars serving as memorial or votive stone monuments which bear Sūtra texts, consecrating inscriptions, sacred formulas or the like. These have been chiselled by stone masons into the stone with great skill to faithfully transcribe handwritten models provided by calligraphers. Even in wild and remote mountain regions one may encounter monumental, even gigantic, inscriptions which have been carved into rocks or cliffs as pious votive offerings. Frequently, these appear in conjunction with sacred figures, and provide the name or names of donors as well as the exact date. In this manner a particular site, as, for example, near a waterfall, becomes a sanctuary adorned by the lively and yet spiritualized play of forms characteristic of Chinese writing.⁹⁹

The symbolic Siddham letters have already been described (see p. 33). These represent a field of Buddhist art which has so far been given little attention. They possess both important religio-magical meaning and high aesthetic qualities. In addition to their dominant religious meaning as written mantras, i.e., as "words" containing sacred essence in a mystical sense, they also possess a pronounced graphic, expressive and decorative value and hence form a special field of calligraphy which is of fundamental importance for the entire artistic life of East Asia. These letters often replace the Buddhist sacred figures to whom they are related, most frequently in maṇḍalas (99), but also on halos, cult implements, etc. They appear frequently in paintings where they usually can be found above the heads of the respective figures. In such instances, they are occasionally executed in a flowing calligraphic style using black ink. They may also appear independently, for example, engraved, etched or affixed on large round metal discs. Most common are paintings (101) or needlework of the normal type and format whose subject is a single such letter in black, white or, preferably, gold, surrounded by the radiance of a halo. This letter hovers on a lotus flower and captures the viewer with its magic charm. These examples make it perfectly clear that such letters not only symbolically indicate a Buddha or another Buddhist entity, but represent them "personally," in the mystic body of their "word."¹⁰⁰

Printing and Graphic Arts

We have already mentioned the copying of texts as a meritorious work. This work is not merely a pious exercise, involving nothing more than the scribe's concentration on the Buddha word while he is writing the text, nor does it merely involve a quest for the highest attainable beauty and perfection in one's labor arising from a belief that only such perfectly executed works have genuine spiritual value. Rather, at the bottom of all this beauty and perfection is the belief in the magic efficacy of the sacred and efficacious words of the Buddha. To repeat these words as often as possible would not only better the chances for achieving one's own salvation but would also enlighten the entire world.

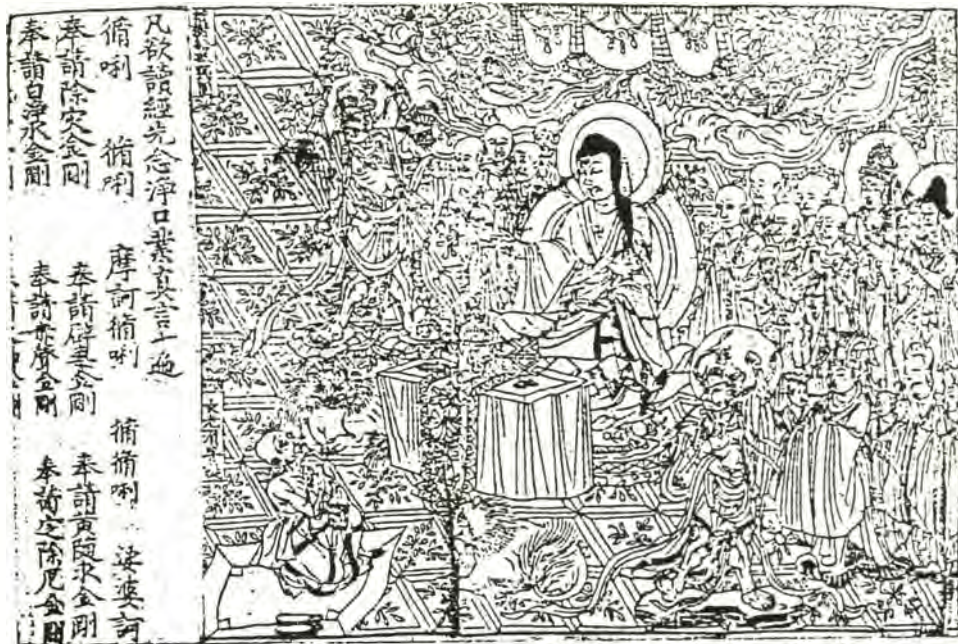
Something akin to this also applies to pictures of sacred beings. Many persons in East Asia, including laymen, take vows to produce, for example, one

thousand Kuanyin pictures executed in ink drawings. This idea of the salvation-promoting multiplication of texts and pictures was certainly a vital stimulus for using graphic techniques for Buddhist purposes. The desire to propagate the doctrine by having sacred books and pictures distributed as widely as possible provided a further powerful motivation. Only woodblock printing could fulfill this function since no other graphic techniques were known in East Asia.

Block printing was very old in China. It was derived from the art of producing stamps and seals dating back to pre-Christian times but is also related to the ancient practice of making rubbings from stone engravings with ink and paper, as a way of multiplying texts and pictures. The classic books of Confucianism were chiselled, as early as in the 2nd century A.D., onto large stone tablets under the supervision of official text editors, and were thus not only permanently preserved but could also be duplicated on demand.

Seals, used everywhere in East Asia, also play an important role in the Buddhist sphere. It is popular with the faithful to acquire small folding books prepared for no other purpose than to have the large square or round seals of temples stamped in them. These seals show the name of a particular sanctuary in the highly ornamentally stylized characters of the ancient Chinese so-called seal script. The fees collected for this service generate a substantial income for the more popular temples. These seal marks also serve as amulets and are at the same time quite attractive as graphic patterns in their own right.

It was only a small step to enlarge these seals into wooden tablets the size of book pages. Therefore, woodblock printing developed very early in East Asia, by the 7th century at the latest. It is also no accident (or at least a very revealing one) that the oldest surviving printed book in the world is a Buddhist work which, among numerous other objects of incalculable cultural and historical value, was found in 1907 by the British archaeologist Sir Aurel Stein in the chamber of a cave temple in Tun-huang; it had been hidden there since 1035. The book bears a colophon dated 5/11/868, which also gives the name of the printer or, more likely, the sponsor (26*).¹⁰¹ It is a scroll more than 5 meters long and 28 centimeters wide, and consists of numerous sheets, each printed separately and subsequently glued together. The text runs in vertical columns from right to left. Its frontispiece, showing the preaching Buddha surrounded by Bodhisattvas and monks, is coincidentally also the oldest surviving woodblock-printed picture in the world. Text and picture both display a mastery of fine, flexibly cut lines forming a complicated web of forms, all of which suggest a long preceding period of development and, therefore, a still earlier origin for East Asian printing. Much earlier than in Europe, printing was also widely spread in the form of bound block-printed books. Buddhist scriptures were not only printed in individual texts but also in encyclopedic collections. A very early edition (supposedly 972) of the entire Chinese Tripitaka, the Buddhist Canon, was printed in China in a vast number of volumes, or rather booklets, and this editing work has been continued ever since. The most recent of these efforts is the modern complete Tōkyō edition in 100 volumes (*Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*, 1924-1932). Innumerable printing blocks of such old editions of sacred scriptures were kept on shelves in temple halls or in special library rooms and made



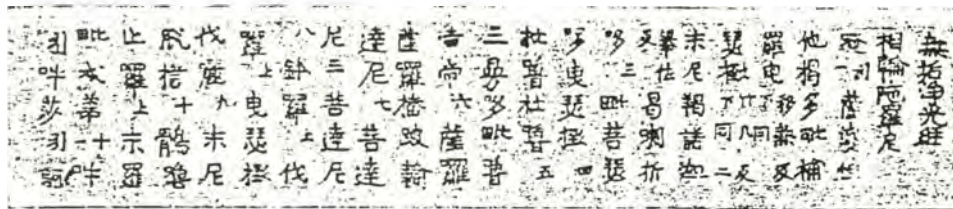
26* Title picture and opening text passage of a Sûtra scroll, dated 868.

available for new printings just like their forerunners, the handwritten Sûtra scrolls. In the Korean temple Hae-in-sa no less than some 80,000 double-faced blocks for this purpose can be seen today.

That printing in East Asia is older than the scroll from the year 868 is proved by other important Buddhist documents which, as far as we can tell, are the second oldest printed materials in the world¹⁰² (next to a Sûtra text from the first half of the 8th century discovered in the Korean pagoda of the Pulguk-sa temple near Kyôngju). These have been preserved in Japan, but are certainly representative of a general East Asian custom. They are narrow strips of paper (27*) bearing several lines of magic formulas (dhârâni) in Chinese characters. Most likely they were printed from cut metal plates as the form of the characters appears to differ in some details from those found in woodblock printing. No less than one million of these strips were printed. Such figures appear to be believable in view of the fact that in the Hôryûji alone many thousands of them have been preserved (single ones also in Western collections). These were produced at the order of Empress Kôken as a pious act in 764 and during the following years. They were placed inside small pagodas of turned wood and distributed among the ten most important Buddhist temples so that their magic power could eradicate the sins of mankind.

In the interior of statues are found not only handwritten but also printed dhârâni, Sûtra texts, etc. (cf. p. 83). Such prints do not, however, belong to Buddhist art proper, but to the larger world of Buddhist culture which was strongly dominated by cultic thought. But the early development of text printing occurred in conjunction with an equally early development of woodblock pictures. The oldest securely dated example of such illustrations, the title picture of the Tun-huang scroll

from the year 868, is most intimately linked to a printed text. The earliest printing method, still rather popular today, consisted of the use of simple wooden stamps to print Buddhist devotional pictures. A fixed, usually very large number of these were printed as pious exercises, in fulfillment of vows, or as good luck charms on certain days or during certain periods. The temples distributed them among the faithful or sold the prints to them--a practice still followed today. Such pictures were also hidden inside cult statues as "Buddhas inside the body" (see p. 83). A spectacular instance are some high-quality Bodhisattva prints from the early Sung period (10th century) which, together with many other votive offerings, were discovered in the famous Śākyamuni statue (Seiryōji, Kyōto) brought back from China by the Japanese monk Chōnen in 987 A.D.



27* Paper strip with magic formulas (dhāraṇī), ca. 765/770.

From early times, pictures printed from seals or larger wooden plates were also colored by hand. Numerous early examples of these have been found in Tun-huang. Occasionally larger, more carefully executed and colored pictures having the character and format of regular paintings are mounted as hanging scrolls (kakemono) and may serve as cheap substitutes for paintings. In most instances, individual figures of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Vidyārājas, etc. are depicted (138). Other examples show groups of many figures and complex scenes, including even such complicated compositions as the so-called Taema Maṇḍala, the Pure Land of the West ruled over by Amitābha (103).

Hand-colored woodblock prints were also used relatively early for the reproduction and duplication of older emakimono with Buddhist themes (for example, the Yūzū-Nembutsu-Engi print of 1390-1414). But many of these colored leaves are not actually genuine graphic works. Their printed outlines served only as technical aids for producing large "editions" of such devotional pictures more conveniently and cheaply: the printed lines were frequently completely painted over, i.e., deliberately hidden, and had to be retraced with ink on top of the colors. Particularly popular or miracle-working cult statues were also depicted in such woodblock prints and taken home by the faithful who deposited them on domestic Buddhist altars or glued them to posts or walls as good luck charms.

The Japanese ukiyo-e colored block prints, which evolved much later, occasionally, though not too frequently, employed Buddhist themes, as, for example, in the woodblock prints of the birth and death of Śākyamuni by artists like Hishikawa Moronobu (1618?-1694) and Nishimura Shigenaga (1697-1756).¹⁰³ These, like the older Buddhist woodblock prints, may actually be simplified

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reproductions of famous paintings. Ukiyo-e artists did not limit themselves to individual sheets (among them also those in a parodizing vein; 35*), but have illustrated entire blockprint books with Buddhist themes. Even Hokusai worked on such commissions during his later years, though with little success.

Another type of Buddhist picture print of considerable importance and even of great practical value for art historians are the multi-volume iconographic handbooks repeatedly compiled throughout the centuries. Such compilations correspond to the medieval *zuzô* compilations (see p. 125) and are largely based on them. Divided into several larger sections, they depict the innumerable Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Vidyārâjas, Devas and related deities, and patriarchs. Representative examples of each of these figure types are frequently arranged in special groups. Special appendices hold illustrations of cult implements, symbols, *mudrâs*, etc. in simple line sketches reproduced with the help of woodblock prints and provide more or less detailed and more or less competent explanations. They provide, therefore, indispensable, albeit by no means always reliable, aids for iconographical research.¹⁰⁴