

志 工：略談北魏的屏風漆畫

A Brief Note on the Lacquer Screen Painting of Northern Wei

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I

IN 1965 the twin burial of a Northern Wei nobleman, Ssu-ma Chin-lung 司馬金龍, and his wife was discovered in Ta-t'ung 大同, Shansi, and a large quantity of cultural relics excavated. The findings have been extensively reported in *Wen Wu* 文物, No. 3, 1972. Among the many relics unearthed from the tomb, a lacquer screen, on which are painted scenes depicting wellknown characters from history, has aroused the attention of the reading public, because it yields not only visible data on the living habits of the ancients; but also a considerable amount of important historical evidence concerning handicrafts and painting in the past.

As a result of the extensive and penetrating drive of archaeological work in China in recent decades, a number of ancient paintings have been discovered, including the painting on silk from the State of Ch'u in the period of the Warring States, many paintings on lacquerware, down to a large number of T'ang paintings on wall, paper and silk. These are enough to give the history of Chinese painting a rich treasury of material evidence (even greater in quantity are paintings which have survived from the Sung dynasty onwards). Under comparison, the only period which cannot boast of so much archaeological evidence is the Southern and Northern Dynasties. Even though the wall paintings of Northern Wei at Tun-huang 敦煌 may be said to be rather rich and centralized, their subject matter is limited to Buddhism and the majority of them suffer from the deterioration of the surface paints. Therefore the appearance of the present lacquer painting, with its depiction of historical and genre themes popular since the Eastern Han dynasty, conveniently fills the gap in this period of the history of Chinese painting.

Where lacquer handicraft is concerned, there has been a wealth of excellent examples unearthed, dating from the Warring Stages period down to T'ang and Sung. This lacquer screen of Northern Wei, therefore, serves an equally important role as historical data in the study of the development of lacquer technique.

In view of the fact that paintings done on silk and paper stand poor chances of preservation, those who do research on the paintings of the past often have to resort to tile, stone and wood carvings,



Plate 35
RUBBING,
Tomb of
Ssu-ma Chin-lung.

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Plate 36 LACQUER SCREEN PAINTING,
Northern Wei. From the Tomb of Ssu-ma
Chin-lung, Ta-t'ung, Shansi.

lacquerware, woven stuff, embroidery etc. which, though engraved by knife, painted by brush or embroidered by needle and thread, can yet reflect the styles and characteristics of the original sketches on which they were based. Furthermore, the effect produced by painting in lacquer is closely approximate to that of painting with a brush on paper, silk, bamboo or wood. Therefore, this lacquer screen, in addition to being a product of ancient handicraft, is also an authentic work of ancient painting.

II

THE IMPERIAL clan of Northern Wei came from the upper class of the Hsien-pei Toba tribe. As they reached Central China, they teamed up with the landlord class of the native Han people to form the ruling clique of Northern Wei. That Ssu-ma Chin-lung, originally a descendant of the nobility of the Chin dynasty, should become a prominent figure in Northern Wei politics illustrates a characteristic of the ruling party of Northern Wei.

The Hsien-pei ruling class of Northern Wei maintained traces of the Hsien-pei tradition in their military organization and language habits, but in their culture and art almost all evidences that have survived or have been excavated belonged exclusively to the Han-Wei tradition. Taking painting and calligraphy as examples, a comparison of works of Northern Wei with those of the Southern Dynasties shows that the differences, if there were any, lie in the minor distinctions of regional styles, rather than in any major racial discrepancy. This reflects, in the formative process of the great Chinese race, the historical situation of an amalgamation of minority tribes with the Central Chinese, and the state of culture and art in which the joint efforts of these peoples brought into being a magnificent China.

Our great leader Chairman Mao Tse-tung teaches that, in feudal societies, "peasants and the handicraft workers were the basic classes which created wealth and culture." Painting, for example, was originated from actual production and practical use. The original creators, ranging from painters of simple animal motifs and geometric patterns on the pottery of primitive societies, the makers of what Lu Hsün described as "profound and monumental" sculpture in the Han dynasty, to those who painted historical and genre themes on Han and Wei screens, were none but the labouring people. The emergence of the painting of scholar-officials was a development founded on the basis of craftsmen painting, for obviously its techniques were first learnt from the latter. Of course, as Chinese painting developed, scholar-official painters of the ruling class had continued to make improvements and innovations in technique, and had exerted definite influences on craftsmen painting; still, in viewing technique, we cannot sever the history of painting's development. Painting was born from the hands of labourers who were directly engaged in production. Without the more archaic art of earlier painting, there could never have issued the rich and refined painting of later ages. In this, of course, is involved the differentiation between the

low-development stage and the high-development stage, nevertheless it is true that all scholar-official painters who had made innovations in art had invariably drawn inspiration or borrowed from the paintings of craftsmen.

Whether judged by technique or by quantity, folk painting done by craftsmen is the main stream of Chinese painting, and forms a distinct system of its own. Histories of painting written by scholar-officials of the past tend to ignore craftsmen painting and cast it outside the realm of art. That, as we understand, is a distorted view of the history of painting. The present lacquer screen painting testifies by its bright colours and vivid images the achievements of folk art and exposes the prejudice and falsity of painting histories written by the ruling class.

III

LET US TAKE a look at the artistic origin and the style of this lacquer screen painting. Stylistically speaking, the figures on it are quite lively. Painted in few lines, they do not have complicated ornamental strokes, but the essential movements of the figures are captured in brief and concise brushwork. What has often been praised of the rock-cut sculptures of Northern Wei found at Yün-kang 雲崗 and Lung-men 龍門—that their carving technique is “simple and archaic”, or in other words that their style is plain, robust and powerful—has been thought to come from the effect of the chisel. Now that the same kind of simplicity, robustness and power is discerned in the way the figures are painted on this lacquer screen, we come to understand that this basically was the painting style of the time.

Comparing this lacquer screen painting with earlier paintings such as the Han dynasty wall paintings found at Lo-yang 洛陽, Liao-yang 遼陽, Wang-tu 望都 and An-p'ing 安平,¹ we find blood and flesh ties in their brush strokes, treatment of lines and methods of representation. They share certain similarities even in the basic tone of their colours.

Comparing this lacquer screen painting with a contemporary work, a scene of *The Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove* 竹林七賢圖 engraved on a tomb the excavated in Nanking,² we find little difference between them in the liveliness of their figural images and the conciseness

¹“On the Structure of the Burial Chamber and the Wall Paintings from a Han Tomb in Wang-tu County, Ho-pei” 河北望都縣漢墓的墓室結構和壁畫, *Wen Wu Ts'an K'ao Tzu Liao* 文物參攷資料, No. 12, 1954;

Wang-tu Han mu pi-hua 望都漢墓壁畫 (Wall Paintings from a Han Tomb at Wang-tu), Chinese Classical Art Press;

“Three Ancient Tombs with Wall Paintings Discovered at Liao-yang” 遼陽發現的三座壁畫古墓, *Wen Wu Ts'an K'ao Tzu Liao*, No. 5, 1955;

“Excavations of a Western Han Tomb with Wall Paintings at Lo-yang” 洛陽西漢壁畫墓發掘報告, *Kaogu Xuebao* 考古學報, No. 2, 1964.

²“A South Dynasties Tomb and Its Wall Paintings of Inscribed Bricks Found at Hsi-Shan Bridge, Nanking” 南京西善橋南朝墓及其磚刻壁畫, *Wen Wu* 文物, Nos. 8 & 9, 1960.

and forcefulness of their lines, despite the absence of brush manner and colour on the tile engraving. Although some minor details had to be different because of the larger size of the tile and the difference in subject matter, in both the overall painting style is the same.

This lacquer screen painting can also be compared with later paintings such as the extant *Admonitions of the Court Instructress* scroll 女史箴圖 and the Sung copy of the *Benevolent and Wise Women* scroll 列女仁智圖. The former, originally a masterpiece by an anonymous painter, was inscribed with a signature written in four small characters "Ku K'ai-chih hua" 顧愷之畫 ("painted by Ku K'ai-chih") at some unknown point of time, making it a standard authentic work by Ku. Sections of calligraphy had been written on the scroll, in a style obviously later than the Northern Wei period; also, they were written by a hand different from the four-character signature, whose calligraphic style should be even later in date. Therefore, the work can only be attributed to the T'ang dynasty or slightly earlier. The latter scroll,

WEI LING-KUNG
AND HIS WIFE

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Plate 37
Section from
lacquer screen
painting.

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Plate 38
Section from
the Benevolent and
Wise Women scroll,
Sung copy
based on an
original work
by Ku K'ai-chih.

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PORTRAIT OF AN EMPEROR

Plate 39 (left):
Section from the
Thirteen Emperors scroll,
attributed to
Yen Li-pen.

Plate 40 (top):
Section from
lacquer screen painting.

Benevolent and Wise Women, has also been attributed to Ku K'ai-chih, its one surviving copy having been proven by the quality of its silk, its particular use of brush and ink, its inscription and other characteristics to be obviously not a work of the Eastern Chin dynasty. This has led some to acknowledge that it is a copy made in the Sung dynasty, but based on an original work by Ku K'ai-chih. Viewing the Northern Wei lacquer screen painting against these two scrolls soon makes it evident that throughout these works there is a similarity in narrative content and even closer resemblance in the treatment of subject matter, the costumes and ornaments of the figures and the daily utensils depicted. Of course, as paintings done on scroll, the *Admonitions* and the *Benevolent and Wise Women* are more finely and intricately executed than the decorative painting done on lacquerware, and, being later in date, they were naturally more advanced in painting technique. From the above comparison we derive this understanding: that the painting style of the two scrolls came from folk art and folk craft, and that the scrolls were made upon an elaboration on the fundamentals of craftsmen painting.

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We may refer to two more painting scrolls bearing the attribution of Yen Li-pen 閻立本 of the T'ang dynasty, namely the scroll of *Emperor T'ai-tsung in a Sedan Chair* 步輦圖 and the *Thirteen Emperors* scroll 帝王圖. They are painted in more refined technique, while many figures, costumes and utensils depicted on them are similar to those found on the lacquer painting. This shows that in artistic technique the same historical tradition is shared by the historical figure paintings of T'ang and the lacquer craftsmen's painting of the earlier age.

The fact that since T'ang and Sung times the above-mentioned scrolls have been attributed to Ku K'ai-chih and Yen Li-pen can be explained by the possibility that these scrolls might have been based on original sketches by those two masters, or that their style and technique were adopted from Ku and Yen. But the discovery of the Northern Wei lacquer screen painting has supplied us with strong material evidence which confirms the heritage of the art of certain famous scholar-official painters. The masters of these painters were in fact the anonymous craftsmen of previous generations and the works which those craftsmen had left behind them.

THE LADY PAN
DECLINED TO
ACCOMPANY THE
EMPEROR IN
HIS PALANQUIN

Plate 41 (top left)
Plate 42 (top right):
Sections from the
Admonitions scroll,
attributed to Ku K'ai-chih.

Plate 43 (below):
Section from lacquer
screen painting.

IV

THE CALLIGRAPHY found on this lacquer screen also deserves our attention. The world-famous Chinese art of calligraphy, with its long history and rich variety of scripts such as the seal script, the clerical script, the cursive script, the running script and the regular script, has enjoyed uninterrupted development for several thousand years and formed a complete system. The Six Dynasties, which saw the flourishing of numerous calligraphy artists, was a glorious age for calligraphy into which the great Chin calligrapher, Wang Hsi-chih 王羲之, was born. The calligraphy of the Six Dynasties as seen on the tile and stone engravings, Buddhist manuscripts and letters of the time appear as either dense and heavy, or untrammelled and vigorous, or archaic and wonderful, or powerful and spontaneous. Among these various stylistic characteristics, they yet illustrate one thing in common: calligraphy's gradual evolution from clerical script to regular script. We need only to compare the following examples to see this similarity in all of them: the inscribed tile of Chiang Miao-yang 江妙養記磚 (dated the 7th year of T'ien-pao 天保 of Northern Ch'i); the scroll fragment of Buddhist manuscript of Northern Liang, now in the collection of the Museum of Chinese Revolutionary History; the Buddhist stele excavated at Hsiang-yang 襄陽, Hupei (dated the 5th year of T'ien-t'ung 天統 of Northern Ch'i); the ink inscription (dating from the Southern Dynasties) written on the side of the tile decorated with armoured horses, excavated at Teng-hsien 鄧縣, Honan; and the document by Hou Fu 侯馥 and others requesting weapon and armour (dated the 6th year of Chien-ch'u 建初 of Western Liang).

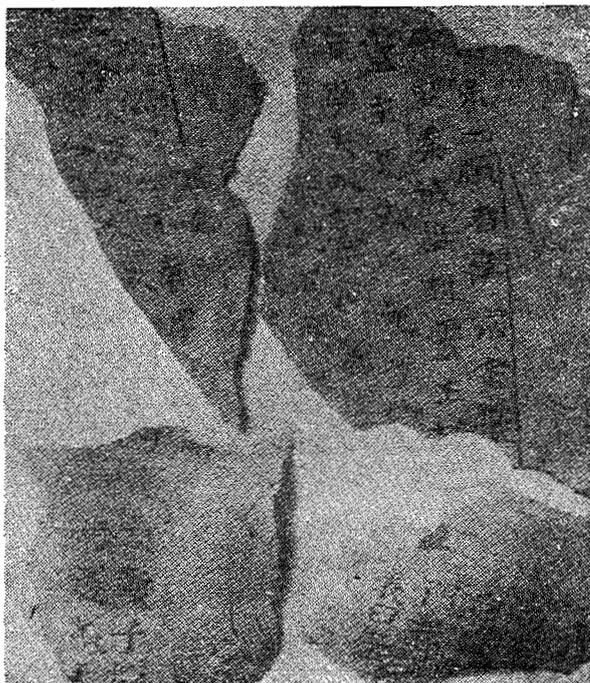
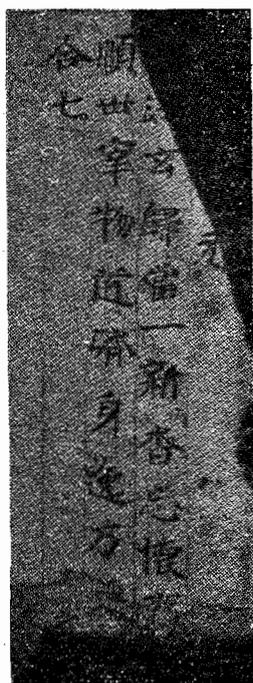


Plate 44
RUBBING,
Tomb of
Ssu-ma Chin-lung.

It is the same with the inscription on the lacquer painting from the tomb of Ssu-ma Chin-lung. The calligraphy is extremely firm, graceful and spontaneous. Its form and construction belong neither to the clerical script of Han nor to the regular script of T'ang, but falls between the clerical and the regular, bearing resemblances as well as dissimilarities to both, and at the same time it imbibes the calligraphic style found on Wei stelae. It is a kind of script which has both flesh and bone, with slender yet rounded brush strokes. Its manner, spacious and clear, imparts to the viewer a feeling of beauty.

Though every individual calligraphy artist may have his own habits and characteristics with regards to strokes and forms, works that are produced in the same period are bound to show common stylistic traits. If comparison is made between some famous stelae of the Six Dynasties and the present lacquer painting and its inscription, it will be seen that the calligraphy on the Stele of Kao Chen 高貞碑 and the Commemorative Stele of Ts'ao Wang-hsi 曹望情題象記, both of the Northern Wei dynasty, bear close affinity to the inscription on the lacquer painting, except for the fact that characters after being transcribed on to stone are largely affected by the chiselling process, and thus their strokes no longer possess the clarity of those written with brush and ink. Most Buddhist sutras of Northern Wei were executed in the format of books or scrolls, and their calligraphy unavoidably differ from the characters on stone stelae, whereas the calligraphic style of the lacquer painting inscription is close to the style and manner of stela calligraphy. Before our archaeological workers discover those Northern Wei stela originals that were written in red and black ink, this inscription on the lacquer painting should be very important

Plate 45
CALLIGRAPHY
FRAGMENTS,
lacquer screen painting.



reference material for verifying the calligraphic style of Northern Wei stelae.

We may also refer to the Ch'iao-tan Stele 肖憺碑 of Prince Shih-hsing 始興 of Southern Liang, written by the calligrapher Pei I-yuan 貝義淵 of the Southern Dynasties, which is quite refined in both its calligraphic style and its manner of engraving. The general characteristics of its brush strokes and character formation display close affinity to the Kao Chen Stele and the Ts'ao Wang-hsi Stele of Northern Wei, which is to say that it may also be compared to the inscription on the present lacquer painting. These are factors worth paying attention to in our study of the art of calligraphy.

Plate 46 KAO CHEN STELE, section.



Plate 47 CH'IAO-TAN STELE, section.



(For Chinese text see page 207)