

PREFACE

THE purpose of this publication is to place before students interested in Eastern art reproductions of select specimens from among the great collection of ancient Buddhist paintings which in the course of the explorations of my second Central-Asian journey, carried out in 1906-8 under the orders of the Government of India, I had the good fortune to recover from a walled-up chapel at the 'Caves of the Thousand Buddhas' near Tun-huang. The essential facts concerning their discovery will be found summarized in Mr. LAURENCE BINYON'S *Introductory Essay*. Those who may wish for details of the circumstances attending it, and for some account of the local conditions which explain the preservation of these relics of ancient Buddhist art in the distant region where the westernmost Marches of true China adjoin the great deserts of innermost Asia, will find them in my personal narrative of that expedition.¹ They have been recorded still more fully in *Serindia*, the final report on the results of my explorations, recently issued from the Oxford University Press.²

In Mr. Binyon's *Introductory Essay* there will be found a lucid exposition, by the hand of a competent expert, of the reasons which invest those paintings with special interest for the study of Buddhist art as transplanted from India through Central Asia to the Far East, and with great importance, too, for the history of Chinese art in general. There light is thrown also on the manifold problems raised by the variety of art influences from the West, the South, and the East which are reflected in different groups of these paintings and which some of them show in striking intermixture.

But throughout it is Buddhist inspiration and legend, as propagated by the Mahāyāna system of Buddhism in Central and Eastern Asia, which furnish the themes of these paintings and determine the presentation of individual figures and scenes in them. For the proper appreciation of their art some knowledge of the traditional elements in subjects and treatment is indispensably needed. It has hence been my aim in the descriptive text referring to each Plate to supply such iconographic information as the non-specialist student may need for the comprehension of the subject and details, and as the present state of our researches permits to be safely offered. In the same descriptive notes I have endeavoured to record information also as to the state of preservation, character of workmanship, colouring, and similar points in each painting.

Having thus briefly indicated the object and scope of this publication, it still remains for me to give some account of the labours which had to precede it, and to record my grateful acknowledgement of the manifold help which alone rendered the realization of this long-cherished plan possible in the end. In Mr. Binyon's *Introductory Essay* reference has been made to the protracted and delicate operations which were needed at the British Museum before the hundreds of paintings, most of them on fine silk, which had lain, often crumpled up into tight little packets, for centuries under the crushing weight of masses of manuscript bundles, could all be safely opened out, cleaned, and made accessible for examination. The far-reaching artistic interest of these pictures had already greatly impressed me when I first beheld them in their original place of deposit. But only as the work of preservation progressed did it become possible fully to realize the wealth and variety of all these materials, the novel problems they raised, and the extent and difficulties of the labours which their detailed study and interpretation would need.

¹ See *Ruins of Desert Cathay* (Macmillan & Co., London, 1912), ii. pp. 20-31, 163-234.

² See *Serindia*, Detailed Report on explorations in Central Asia and Westernmost China, carried out and

described under the orders of H.M. Indian Government by Aurel Stein, K.C.I.E., Indian Archaeological Survey (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1921, vols. i-v, Royal 4to), pp. 791-825.