

PLATE XII

SCENES FROM GAUTAMA BUDDHA'S LIFE

THIS and the following Plate, together with Plate xxxvii, illustrate a group of paintings well represented among the silk banners of the Collection and of special iconographic and artistic interest. Painted like the rest of the silk banners on both sides of a fine gauze-like fabric, they show scenes taken from the legendary life of Gautama Buddha or closely connected with it. The usual length of the banners (exclusive of the triangular top and other accessories) does not appear to have much exceeded twenty-five inches, and their width, as seen from the specimens which Plate XII reproduces full size, is restricted. As a necessary result of the narrow shape of the banners, we find the succession of scenes always arranged one above the other and in the completely preserved ones limited to four.²¹

This group of paintings is as well defined in style as it is in range of subjects and external arrangement. Everything in the scenes connected with the physical types of the actors, their costumes and movements, as well as the setting, whether architecture or landscape, appears here 'translated bodily into Chinese', to use Mr. Binyon's graphic phrase. The traditional subjects of the historical Buddha's life-story have in fact, as M. Foucher has with equal pregnancy put it, 'undergone the same disguising transformation which Christian legend has under the hands of the Italian or Flemish painters'.²² It contrasts strikingly with this, that the figures of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, in our banners and large paintings alike, show close conformity in physical appearance and dress to the hieratic types derived from the Graeco-Buddhist art of Gandhāra. For possible explanations of the very interesting problem thus raised reference to Mr. Binyon's 'Introductory Essay' will suffice here.

Notwithstanding their frankly Chinese style, the banners with scenes from Gautama Buddha's Life show considerable diversity of composition and treatment. We note these variations all the more easily because the banners range themselves into small groups, one alone not affording sufficient room for a representation of even the most important incidents of the Life. Two banners of such a group, each with only two scenes preserved out of the four which the original, no doubt, once comprised, are shown in Plate XII on the left and right. Both banners have the same decorated borders along the sides and between the several scenes, and both have cartouches, here fortunately filled with Chinese inscriptions naming the subjects represented.

The banner on the left (Ch. lv. 0016) shows us two of the famous 'Four Encounters' which bring before Prince Gautama's eyes the three evils of earthly life—old age, illness, and death, and the means to escape them by renunciation. We find them all represented already in the fifth-century reliefs of Yün-kang, while strangely enough they have not yet been found among the Gandhāra sculptures.²³ Above we see the prince riding out of the green-tiled gateway of the battlemented courtyard wall of his father's palace. Over it is shown a pavilion with red timber framework and greenish-blue roof. The red-maned well-drawn horse represents the Kaṇṭhaka of the legend. A courtier in flowing robes with a high black cap attends him on foot. Before him under a tree is shown the bent figure of the old man leaning upon a stick and wearing on his head a black hood. Another man, who stands by his side and evidently supports him, has the black lobed and tailed cap to which reference has been made above as the head-dress worn by the donors of our oldest Tun-huang paintings. It is that of all common personages in our Jātaka scenes. The high conical head-dress of the courtier is found also in the above-quoted relief panels of Yün-kang.²⁴ Prince Gautama himself in the scenes of both our banners here wears a head-ornament resembling a white lotus.

²¹ For details on these points and on the question of style, cf. *Serindia*, p. 847 sq.

²² Cf. *Serindia*, p. 848.

²³ Cf. *Serindia*, p. 850; Chavannes, *Mission archéologique en Chine*, i. Planches 207-10.

²⁴ Cf. *Serindia*, p. 849, note 18.