

beautifully painted figures of Buddhist divinities, retaining their harmonious colours in perfect freshness (Figs. 87, 88).

The silk used for these banners was invariably a transparent gauze of remarkable fineness. The risks attending the use of such a delicate fabric were demonstrated only too clearly when subsequently I came upon convolutes containing silk paintings much larger in size. Though provided originally with borders of stronger material, these large silk hangings had often suffered a good deal, obviously in the course of long use while displayed on the temple walls. They must have been closely and carelessly folded up at the time of their deposition, and were much creased and crumpled in consequence.

After centuries of compression, I could not have attempted to open them out completely at the time of discovery without obvious risks of further damage. But by lifting a fold here and there it was possible to see that the scenes represented were often elaborate and crowded with figures. It was scarcely surprising that the delicate and difficult process of unfolding and cleaning all the paintings, amounting in the end to hundreds, occupied expert hands at the British Museum for some seven years.

There was no time then to search for votive inscriptions nor for any closer study of the paintings. My main care was how many of them I might be able to rescue from their dismal imprisonment and from the risks of their present guardian's careless handling. To my surprise and relief, he attached little value to these fine art relics of T'ang times. So I could rapidly put aside 'for further inspection' the best of the pictures I could lay my hands on at that first day's rapid search.