

Production
of votive
paintings.

It can scarcely be doubted that practices which were likely to arise from this use of pictures as votive offerings by pious visitors to the sacred caves must have closely affected the very production and character of the paintings. Only in relatively rare cases where donors of considerable means and, perhaps, of special devout leanings were concerned is it probable that the paintings presented were the result of individual orders given in advance to particular artists. Such an assumption may hold good as regards certain of the large compositions found in the collection which must have involved much artistic labour and corresponding expense, or a few of the smaller pieces which by their superior style and execution prove themselves the work of artists of merit.²⁶ But we may safely assume that the great mass of the pictures was produced as it were for the market, kept in stock at Tun-huang for intending pilgrims, or perhaps brought also to the Thousand Buddhas for sale on the spot at times of special festivals. If analogies from the West were needed to illustrate this, a visit, e. g., to the picture and sculpture shops round Saint-Sulpice at Paris or to Lourdes at times of great pilgrimages would supply them in plenty and in a form distinctly instructive.

Inscriptions
not filled
in on
paintings.

The extent to which this origin of the paintings is reflected in the character of their execution and in the relatively restricted range and monotony of the subjects is a question of considerable interest, but too large to be examined here. Yet it is easy to trace results of this origin in a curious feature which strikes us at once in a number of paintings. I refer to the unfortunately only too numerous instances where the cartouches painted above or beside figures have not been filled with the names or inscriptions that they were undoubtedly meant to receive.²⁷ The explanation is not far to seek. The addition of the inscriptions, with due regard to the refinements of Chinese calligraphy, was not the business of the painter. When he worked, as in most cases, not to an individual order but for the market, he naturally left the trouble and cost of this supplementary labour to the unknown future purchaser. The latter, again, was often not likely to trouble about such a minor addition to his gift, especially if he had bethought himself of his pious intention, as human weakness would have it, only immediately before the pilgrimage or at the very time of his visit to the sacred site. What M. Foucher has very truly observed about the blanks which in manuscripts so often take the place of intended miniatures,²⁸ applies with equal justice, but in the inverse sense, also to the far too many blank cartouches in our Ch'ien-fo-tung paintings. Stranger, perhaps, it is in some cases to find the space also left unfilled which had been provided for the votive inscription of the donor.²⁹ Perhaps the pious givers felt assured that the divinities they implored could recognize their persons and wishes even without a written prayer.

SECTION III.—ARRANGEMENT, MATERIALS, AND TECHNIQUE

Taking the collection of pictures as a whole, irrespective of the subjects represented and the materials used, and leaving aside the relatively few which served a special non-votive purpose, such

²⁶ See, e. g., the fine painting of Vaiśravaṇa's progress, Ch. 0018 (Pl. LXXII); Avalokiteśvara guiding a soul, Ch. lvii. 002 (Pl. LXXI); the fine Avalokiteśvara, Ch. xviii. 003 (*Thousand Buddhas*, Pl. XX), etc.

²⁷ For examples of such blank cartouches, cf. Pl. LVII, LXII, LXIV, LXVII-LXX, LXXIV-LXXVI, LXXIX-LXXXII, etc. While in the case of the, no doubt, cheaper paintings on linen (see Pl. LXXXVIII, sq.) the omission seems regular and can scarcely surprise us, it is curious to observe a blank also in the fine painting of Vaiśravaṇa's progress, Pl. LXXII, which bears every mark of a true artist's hand.

²⁸ Cf. Foucher, *L'iconographie bouddhique de l'Inde*, p. 21: 'On sait en effet que toute miniature différée est une minia-

ture perdue. Plus d'une fois sur nos feuilles de palmier, comme sur les parchemins du moyen âge, nous trouvons ainsi la place qu'on leur avait ménagée d'avance condamnée à rester perpétuellement en blanc.'

²⁹ See Pl. LXVII (Ch. 0021; also *Thousand B.*, Pl. XXV). In the large painting Ch. liii. 001 (*Thousand B.*, Pl. X), the omission of the inscription is all the more remarkable because the donors had taken special care to have their persons commemorated in the predella-like foot portion of the painting. The fine figure of the lady reproduced in the vignette of the title-page of the *Thousand Buddhas* looks like a real portrait, and is certainly by the hand of an artist different from, and superior to, the painter of the rest.