

CHAPTER XXIII

PICTORIAL REMAINS FROM THE THOUSAND BUDDHAS

SECTION I.—RECOVERY AND STUDY OF THE PAINTINGS

AMONG all the varied contents of the walled-up chapel with which the hurried 'excavation' described in the preceding chapter had acquainted me, there were none of which I could more easily recognize the interest and value than the mass of pictorial representations embedded in miscellaneous bundles and within packets of manuscript rolls. It was fortunate in more than one way that Wang Tao-shih's attitude towards this class of relics was one of indifference. Neither their artistic merit nor their religious character seemed to make any special appeal to him, and this greatly facilitated my 'selection'. Thus, in spite of the difficulties attending my rapid search, I succeeded in carrying away for my collection by far the greatest portion of all that the hiding-place had preserved in the way of paintings, drawings, and similar art remains. This and the wider interest which may be claimed for them justify our turning to them in the first place.

Gathering
of pictorial
remains.

In the course of that hurried gathering in Wang Tao-shih's shrine it was impossible to spare time for any closer inspection of these fine relics of Buddhist pictorial art. But the condition in which I discovered them, and the trouble which their subsequent safe packing cost me, made me feel doubly grateful at the time for the chance of rescuing them from the priest's careless handling. The majority of them were painted on very fine silk, some of gauze-like texture, the material of the rest being either linen or paper. The prevailing use of the more precious material, silk, was gratifying in itself; for I soon realized that superior care and technique in the painting ordinarily accompanied it. But equally clear it was that the fineness of the material had exposed these pictures to increased risks of damage and greatly added to the difficulties of safe transport and examination. Some of the narrow painted banners first recovered from 'miscellaneous' bundles were found, indeed, neatly rolled up, and the pliable and soft condition that their silk material had retained allowed them to be unfolded with ease. Embedded amidst votive rags, crumpled-up papers, and the like, their fabrics had been protected from pressure and consequent hardening.

Their con-
dition at
discovery.

But pictures emerging from other bundles had fared far worse. Those found tucked away among the heavy Chinese rolls of regular 'library bundles' showed plainly under what crushing weight they had lain for centuries. Pressure had turned them into tight little packets, so hard and brittle that their delicate fabric would break or flake off at any attempt to open them on the spot. The big silk paintings, ranging as examination has since shown to over seven feet in height, had necessarily suffered much more damage from this compression of close on nine hundred years and from the neglect that they are likely to have undergone before. Some appeared to have been folded up at the time of their deposition in a more or less regular fashion. But I could not open out even these completely from fear of increasing the damage they had already undergone at the creases.¹ Most of the large pictures, however, or of the fragments once forming part of them

Damage
to silk
paintings.

¹ The damage caused by this original folding and creasing can be seen only too plainly in some of the large paintings

reproduced, e.g. in Pl. LVII, LX, LXIII, LXVIII, LXX, etc.