FOUR UNPUBLISHED PAINTINGS FROM DUNHUANG IN THE ORIENTAL COLLECTIONS OF THE BRITISH LIBRARY

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The Stein collection in the British Library is essentially a manuscript collection numbering thousands of scrolls of Buddhist sutra texts and other documents, the great majority originating from Cave 17 at the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas at Mogao near Dunhuang in Gansu Province, built in the mid-ninth century as a memorial for the high-ranking monk Hongbian, and adopted in the early eleventh century as a safe resting-place for outdated scrolls and ex-votos. Although some of the manuscripts contain illustrations, the Buddhist paintings in the collection were assigned to the Sub-Department of Oriental Prints and Drawings of the British Museum and are now kept in the Department of Oriental Antiquities. Thus the recent rediscovery of four previously unpublished and unregistered Buddhist paintings on hemp cloth, unquestionably from Dunhuang, in the British Library adds an extra dimension to the collection, in terms of both material and iconography. The four paintings (Plates II-IV) are as follows:

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This is a rectangular painting, 71 cm. high and 55 cm. wide, with three suspension loops sewn to the top edge. The central image is of Avalokiteśvara, accompanied by the Good and Bad boys (usually accompanying Kṣitigarbha; they watch over the doings of individuals and make periodic reports to the underworld court of King Yama where the soul will be judged after death) and the sun and moon, in the upper part of the painting, and two vajra kings, on either side lower down. The donors who commissioned the work are portrayed in a ruled-off section at the bottom: on the right is a male donor, holding a rosary, and accompanied by a boy holding a fan; his wife is opposite him, holding a censer, and accompanied by a girl with a fly whisk. Each of the two is seated on a dais, so it is likely that they show a minor official and his wife. Some characters remain partially legible next to the two servants, and traces of ink in the central panel between them show that there was originally an inscription, which would probably have given details of the donors’ names, the date and the purpose of the dedication. Even though there is no hope of being able to read the main inscription, however, it is possible to date
Almanac for the year 877. Or. 8210/P.6 (detail)
Add. Or. 5222
PLATE III

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the painting to the second half of the tenth century, on the basis of its style, colouring and composition. The weave of the cloth is fairly coarse, with 10 to 11 warp threads per centimetre, and 10 to 12 weft threads.

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This banner, 67 cm. high and 19 cm. wide (except at the top where the maximum width is 29 cm.), with a single remaining side-streamer, shows a bodhisattva, with hands in aṣṭa-mudrā, the gesture of worship. Although not complete, lacking the other side-streamer and those at the bottom, which would have doubled its height, this banner is entirely typical of mid to late tenth-century votive offerings. The main body is of coarse hemp cloth, with 14 to 15 warp threads per centimetre, and 8 to 10 in the weft. The triangular space at the head of the banner shows a typical flower and pair of green leaves, on a red ground, and a hanging valance or curtain below. It seems most likely, as this bodhisattva is facing to his right, and lacks any particular identification, that such a banner was originally one of a pair hung on either side of a central Buddha or bodhisattva image, which would have been the central feature. As offerings specifically mentioned in the sutras, banners were an essential part of Buddhist worship, and just as in Buddha groups in the wall paintings or stucco figures in rock-cut niches, the Buddha is always accompanied by images of bodhisattvas and disciples, and in some cases by guardian kings and doorkeepers: the making or dedication of images being in itself a meritorious act, one would not expect such paintings to have been hung on their own.

Add. Or. 5224

Similar to the preceding, but taller and narrower and with the bodhisattva facing proper left, this banner is 82 cm. high and 22.5 cm. wide. The uninscribed red cartouche could in theory have been inscribed, but in practice such cartouches were often left blank: the person executing the painting was probably seldom the same person as the one who eventually inscribed it. Nevertheless, the slight increase in size, and the provision of such a cartouche, might well reflect a marginal difference in quality for the person dedicating it in order to secure merits. Another clue to this effect is the remains of the border to the headpiece, which in this case is of a plain yellow silk, with about 48 warp threads and 27 weft threads per centimetre. This is a reversal of the usual case, where a hemp cloth border was used to strengthen a silk painting: here the silk edging must have added a certain distinction. One might also observe that what does remain of the silk is quite well preserved, giving rise to the suspicion that it was torn off and reused. Silk was precious, especially in the tenth century when Dunhuang had become practically isolated from central China, and a great many small scraps of silk textile or embroideries were reused by being sewn into altar cloths and canopies, or used as patches in a kāṣāya or monk’s robe, and the like.
This slightly smaller banner painting shows a bodhisattva in frontal representation, with one hand raised and the other lowered, both with the thumb and forefinger touching. The banner is 50 cm. high, and about 22 cm. wide, except at the top where one edging remains to the triangular head. This edging, with 17 warp threads and 12 weft threads to the centimetre, is noticeably better in quality than the body of the banner, which is the coarsest of all four paintings, with 12 to 13 warp threads and only 8 weft threads per centimetre. A thickened strip runs across the bottom, recalling the bamboo splint usually inserted at this point on silk banners to keep them properly stretched when hanging on display. Since the hemp cloth itself is robust enough to keep in shape, such a splint is not found on the hemp banners, but it could be that this thickened part is put there in imitation of the better material.

Although the majority of Buddhist paintings found at Dunhuang by Aurel Stein, Paul Pelliot and others are painted on fine silks, a substantial number use other materials such as paper or hemp cloth. These last have generally been accorded less attention than the silk banners and larger paintings, but they have an important part to play in the reconstruction of the artistic and religious life of the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas, now better known as the Mogao Caves, near the garrison town of Dunhuang on the ancient trade route between China and the Western Regions. Indeed, the majority of the silks used for paintings and textile banners or fragments found in Cave 17 were not originally made in Dunhuang at all, but are vivid testimony to the passing trade, having originated within China, or, in some cases, from places to the west of Dunhuang. The paintings executed on hemp cloth, however, were much more likely to use material of local origin. For many centuries, until the mid-Tang dynasty when Dunhuang was occupied, from about 780 to 848, as an outpost of the Tibetan empire, the commerce of merchants and monks along the trade routes leading to the capital Chang’an, and westwards around the Taklamakan desert via Kucha or Khotan to the Pamirs, Samarkand and the Mediterranean, was lively enough to assure a plentiful supply of silks and silk paintings. When this commerce was interrupted, first under the Tibetans and then in the declining years of the Tang dynasty and the subsequent Five Dynasties when the central government was powerless to secure it, locally-produced materials began to come into their own, and hemp cloth, especially treated to provide a fine white ground for painted images, may even have become the medium of choice for Buddhist adherents commissioning images of the Buddha and bodhisattvas.

Some twenty-two of the Dunhuang paintings in the British Museum are on hemp cloth,¹ and a further forty-one in the National Museum, New Delhi. While the majority, in both sections of the Stein collection, are fairly simple standing images of bodhisattvas, most often Avalokiteśvara, there are also a number of more complex compositions,
including subjects which show the influence of the Esoteric school: for instance the two paintings of the Mandala of Avalokitesvara, in the British Museum,\textsuperscript{2} instances of the Paradise of Amitābha (noted by Waley as ‘on fine linen’), Amitābha with his two principal bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta; Bhaishajyaguru; Avalokitesvara with a thousand arms; and Maitreya. The National Museum in New Delhi also has three miniature painted canopies, made to suspend over images which were presumably sculptural. On their own, they represent a significant proportion of the total number found in the library cave; in addition, a great many of the silk paintings were furnished with hemp-cloth borders, or suspension loops made of hemp-cloth, and some were also backed with hemp-cloth, showing how widespread was the use of this material. One of the finest and largest of all the images from Dunhuang, the great embroidery showing the Vulture Peak Buddha (properly, the Buddha of Liangzhou that figures in the story of the monk Liu Sahe in Cave 72 and in several other paintings and murals from Dunhuang) in front of a rocky peak, accompanied by two disciples and two bodhisattvas with crowns of Sasanian type, is embroidered on three widths of silk which are in turn supported on three widths of unbleached hemp cloth, without which the whole composition would long since have disintegrated, since the fine white silk forming the ground has worn away in many places where it is not covered by the embroidery.

The Pelliot collection in the Musée Guimet, Paris, has forty-two paintings on hemp cloth, including some unusually fine examples, either on account of the excellent preservation of the colours of some of them, or of their iconography or dated inscriptions: for instance, a large scene of Śakyamuni Preaching,\textsuperscript{3} a fine painting of two facing images of Avalokitesvara, one of which, most exceptionally, holds a small image of Amoghapāsa, dated 950;\textsuperscript{4} a painting of Amoghapāsa, dated 950;\textsuperscript{5} several images of the eleven-headed Avalokitesvara, including one dated 959;\textsuperscript{6} a joint depiction of the Thousand-armed Avalokitesvara with Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva and the Ten Kings;\textsuperscript{7} a square altar cloth with two phoenixes and two lions;\textsuperscript{8} and a pair of double-sided banner tops of stunningly bright red colour with yellow-winged birds.\textsuperscript{9} A further twenty-one hemp paintings from Dunhuang are in the collection of The State Hermitage, St Petersburg.\textsuperscript{9a}

Hemp-cloth was evidently greatly valued for its strength, as instanced by its use as a backing for the large silk embroidery, as a protection or binding for the edges (useful not only in keeping thin silk paintings flat while on display, but also in folding them away securely when not in use), or as a repair material. The small canopies (another is in the British Museum)\textsuperscript{10} show that hemp cloth may also have been used in larger canopies that have not survived, or they may be token gifts from devotees unable to afford the more expensive alternatives. When used to make banners, hemp cloth was not only intrinsically cheaper than silk: it was also simpler to make, as the whole banner could be constructed of the same material; indeed, even the tail streamers could be cut from the same cloth that formed the body of the banner and its triangular top. Quite often, however, the streamers or headpiece might be made of hemp cloth dyed a different colour: pink, bright pink, olive-green, green, cream, yellow and buff are all found on the
banners in the Stein collections in London and Delhi and in the Pelliot collection, and the same colours can be found as borders on some of the larger silk paintings. Most of the hemp cloth banners apparently did not need a weighting board or stiffening strips, either (perhaps they were meant to be carried hung from the head of a staff?), but these were sometimes provided, in the same fashion as those more often found on the silk banners. One such hemp cloth banner in the British Museum has a total length of 227.2 cm., entirely comparable with complete examples of silk banners, so it is possible that other hemp cloth banners with shorter streamers and without a weighting board are not in fact complete in their present state. It is clear that hemp cloth, as well as being an essential commodity for everyday life, had a valuable role to play in the worship and adornment of Buddhist shrines and images: in order to fit it to this purpose, it was common to dye it or to paint images on the whitened surface of the cloth. Most often, the triangular top has borders of light red or pink, while the side and bottom streamers are dark olive-green, so that the painted image on the whitened ground (occasionally, on a red ground) is framed and set off in a striking manner.

THE USES OF HEMP CLOTH IN CHINA

Hemp-cloth or linens were made from a variety of Chinese plants, but there seems little doubt that most mahu 麻布 or hemp-cloth was made from Cannabis sativa, or dama 大麻 (great hemp), abundant throughout China, which yielded the best and longest fibres. Evidence of its use in the Neolithic period has been found at the dwelling site of Dahecun, near Zhengzhou in Henan province. Among other species, the principal kind was zhu 竹 or zhuma 竹麻 (ramie), whose long, fine fibres were strong and light, resistant to moisture, leading to its use for summer garments. The plant grows best on warm moist slopes, and has been found in the Neolithic culture of Hemudu.

In the north of China, the use of hemp cloth was extremely widespread as the standard material for the clothing of ordinary people, for army uniforms and even as winter coats for oxen. The finer kinds were evidently used also for summer clothing. Even today in Korea, Buddhist monks wear robes of hemp or ramie cloth, dyed a pale grey and starched. Treating hemp cloth with lye and putting it out to dry in the sun bleached it to a brilliant whiteness, and using this method, we are informed by Wang Zhen writing in the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), hemp cloth from the north was worth several times as much as that from the south. In the south also, however, actual examples of fine hemp cloth have been excavated from a Warring States tomb in Changsha, and from the famous Western Han tomb (c. 168 BC) of the wife of the Marquess of Dai, at Mawangdui near Changsha in Hunan province. The hemp cloth found in these tombs, however, was of a quality approaching that of modern linen: that from the Warring States tomb had 28 warp threads and 24 weft threads per centimetre, while at Mawangdui the finer kind has some 32 to 38 warp threads and 34 to 36 weft threads per centimetre, in two widths of 51 cm. and 20 cm., and was evidently intended for clothing; the coarser kind had 18 or 19 threads per centimetre in both directions, and a width of
45 cm. With its uneven thickness of thread, this is not unlike the hemp paintings from Dunhuang, where the width was usually about 50 cm. (as with silk paintings, larger surfaces for images were constructed by sewing two or more widths together).

THE COLOURS USED IN PAINTINGS ON HEMP CLOTH

Jacques Giès, in a long essay on ‘The Pictorial Language of Dunhuang’, accompanying the recently published catalogue of the Pelliot Collection, introduces an entirely new theory concerning the use of colour in the paintings on hemp cloth found at Dunhuang. Giès contrasts an expressive palette, characteristic of paintings on silk and of the High Tang period (c. 705–90), with a ‘palette of substitution’ which can easily be recognized in the paintings on hemp cloth, which mainly date from the ninth century or later. The difference between them, he maintains, is ‘not so much a reduction in the breadth of the chromatic range as a marked reduction in quantity (and sometimes in quality), being characterised by the absence of one or more pigments, and their corresponding substitution by other composite pigments.’ He notes that ‘some of the rarer mineral pigments – cinnabar, malachite and azurite – seem particularly prone to this expedient measure, by virtue of their importance.’ ‘Thus a red ochre frequently associated with red lead (minium) replaces cinnabar red and atacamite red (an oxychloride of copper); sometimes a green earth or a bistre colour hard to identify replaces malachite green.’

More than one substitute pigment is used for each colour, nor are they related chemically to the rarer pigments they replace, with the exception of azurite (itself a substitute for lapis-lazuli), where a grey-blue colour is produced by the use of low-grade azurite crystals eked out with white lead, or sometimes with carbon black. In regard to one of the Pelliot hemp-cloth banners, a ‘Bodhisattva d’offrande’ with hands in anjali-mudrā that is remarkably similar to the three British Library banners, employing ‘a very limited chromatic range consisting essentially of earth-derived ochres’, Giès calls attention to the way in which ‘the vigorous two-tone colouring of the robes (pari-dāna), contrasts with the rendering of the remainder, showing an iconographical distinction achieved by strictly pictorial means.’ His argument is that while the painters were still seeking, with limited means, to achieve some of the effects of plasticity that had been developed in the expressive mode, there appeared a distinct style which is particularly characteristic of paintings on hemp cloth, and that the essential preparation of the white ground provides an analogy to the processes of mural paintings in the cave-temples. In the case of the hemp-cloth paintings, this is carbonated lime or calcium carbonate, while China clay (kaolin) was used for the mural paintings. Giès points to its functional importance and systematic use, so much so that it seems to have evolved into a dominant element of the colour scheme.

We can be grateful to Giès for the insight which he brings to the analysis of colour in the Dunhuang paintings, but it may be necessary to qualify his arguments with a couple of further observations. One, that I have already mentioned, concerns the all-important role of the bindings of the headpieces and of the side and bottom streamers.
in increasing the luminosity of the whitened ground and the painted image. To my eyes, we can only begin to appreciate the function of even the simplest votive image when we can see it complete with these essential elements of its construction: one might note that the side streamers (the arms, if one adopts an anthropomorphic analogy) overlap the painted area, so that they do not only frame it but help to protect it as well, while the legs or lower streamers elevate it, and the red or white binding that so often crowns the triangular top completes the effect. Nor should we forget that the reverse of these hemp-cloth banners is in fact also painted with a similar image, so that when they were carried in procession, suspended from the top of a tall staff, they would turn and be visible from every side. The second point that needs to be borne in mind has to do with the proposed analogy with the wall-paintings, on the basis of the use of calcium carbonate in the preparation of both (and of one particularly beautiful painting on paper from the Pelliot collection, fragments of which, depicting the King of Khotan wearing the horns of a deer, and a demon holding aloft the son granted to him by Vaiśravana, are also held in the British Museum). Of course there is a close relationship between the latter and the portable paintings found in Cave 17: therein lies the importance of considering all the materials found there in the context of the site, the history and social circumstances of the Dunhuang area, and its relation with the larger contexts of the Hexi region (west of the Yellow River) and with metropolitan China; but in the immediate context of artistic production of portable paintings, the closest relation remains that with silk paintings. In the case of silk, unlike hemp cloth, there was no need for a special whitening of the surface, which was already sufficiently brilliant in itself; the fact that we are no longer especially aware of this as a factor in the case of the silk paintings is merely because of the gradual mellowing of the silk itself. Again, in the case of the silk banners, the material itself was sheer enough to ensure that the image painted on the front would show through clearly on the back; but with the banners on hemp cloth, it was necessary for them to be painted twice, on both recto and verso, as just noticed.

In case it should be asked why this group of banners had not been previously noticed or even registered as part of the Stein collection, we have only to consider the enormous wealth of materials brought to London by Stein. It was only thanks to Stein’s own indefatigable work of recording, and the care accorded to the collections by Fred Andrews, Miss Lorimer, and the Japanese mounter Mr Urushibara, that the bulk of the collections were safely recorded, housed and conserved. As this group of four are by no means unique, they were doubtless set aside at some moment, to come to light only decades later. Ironically, however, two splendid silk paintings in the Pelliot collection, also entirely unrecorded, were set aside for quite different reasons, principally on account of their enormous size: they have been researched and discussed in detail by Jacques Giès, who discovered them. It is not anticipated that further discoveries of this particular kind, as opposed to advances in knowledge, remain to be made in the Stein collection, but the author hopes that in future it may still be possible to reunite (albeit electronically) some of the many headpieces that are separately preserved with the banners to which they originally belonged, so as to have a more complete picture of popular worship at the Dunhuang caves.
2 Whitfield, vol. ii, pl. 38, fig. 74.
4 Gies, vol. i, pl. 65 (EO 1139).
5 Gies, vol. i, pl. 79 (MG 23079).
7 Gies, vol. i, pl. 65 (EO 1773).
8 Gies, vol. ii, pl. 105 (EO 1174).
9a See Dunhuang Relics collected in Russia, vol. i (St. Petersburg and Shanghai: The State Hermitage Museum and Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 1999), pls. 91–111.
10 Whitfield, vol. ii, fig. 77.
11 Whitfield, vol. ii, pl. 43, fig. 61 (Stein painting 155, Ch. i.0016).
17 Gies (English translation), p. 27.
18 Gies (English translation), p. 27.
21 Gies (English translation), p. 31.
22 Gies, vol. ii, pl. 15; Whitfield, vol. ii, pl. 50 (Stein painting 178*). I am grateful to Wei Chen-hsüan whose dissertation in progress on Maitreya as Cakravartin first made me aware of the significance of the antlered headdress on the larger fragment in the British Museum.