

Inspiring and Enlightening: A Study of the Late Ming Artist Zheng Zhong and Handscroll Paintings of Lohans Crossing Water

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Abstract

Among lohan paintings of the late Ming dynasty, the subject on lohans crossing water and the popularity of handscroll paintings are of particular note. And of the surviving handscroll paintings on lohans crossing water, most of them show the lohans crossing water using supernatural powers. However, *Eighteen Lohans* by the late Ming painter Zheng Zhong depicts grouped lohans as ordinary old men stumbling about and requiring support to cross the water. The Japanese scholar Nishigami Minoru has defined the aforementioned as “lohans crossing water in a supernatural way” and the latter as “lohans crossing water in a natural way,” pointing to a complex development of this painting subject composition for further discussion.

In the development of paintings on lohans crossing water from the Song to Ming dynasty, extremely few of the type on “lohans crossing water in a natural way” have survived, resulting in them receiving relatively less attention. The present study analyzes *Eighteen Lohans* to show that it continues in part from the group compositional format of paintings showing lohans crossing water in a natural way from the Song dynasty. Using the “shore-water-shore” composition of spatial construction, the lohans represented in the front, middle, and rear groups in this type reveal corresponding poses of action and respite. It demonstrates that “time” was an organizing factor in the painting of lohans naturally crossing water in the handscroll format, a feature that continued from the Song and into the Ming dynasty.

The artist of *Eighteen Lohans*, Zheng Zhong, left behind a group of surviving works in a wide variety of styles, which perhaps was in response to requests from different patrons. This particular handscroll is in a fine and elegant Wu School style to depict the lohans crossing water, being a representative lohan scroll painting in his career. Parallels in the handscroll can be found with the poses and forms of the figures found in earlier paintings of lohans crossing water along with more innovative developments that clearly

expand upon the painting of groups. In the late Ming, the contents of religious figure painting featured a large range extending beyond the bounds of scriptural doctrinal norms due to the rapid expansion of visual knowledge and the circulation of information. With ever increasing variations, the same subject in terms of visual representation differed from that of the Song dynasty to express the needs and reactions of contemporary audiences.

When scholars viewed a handscroll of lohans crossing water in the Song dynasty, they clearly critiqued the lohans crossing the water as natural or supernatural, but in the end it was to identify the painter and appreciate the work. However, laypeople in the late Ming dynasty, when faced with a handscroll painting of lohans crossing water, took a more diverse and reflective psychological process while interpreting it with Buddhist argumentation. By personally meditating in the “viewing” experience, it would inspire and enlighten while continually allowing one to explore the confusion in mind. The viewer could thus directly obtain results of practice and take a step beyond Chan painting that required a Chan master for guidance and into a new mode of meditation.

Keywords: Paintings of lohans crossing water in a natural / supernatural way, *Eighteen Lohans* scroll, Zheng Zhong, layperson, hermit, handscroll painting, meditation

(Translated by Donald E. Brix)