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## CONSERVATION PROBLEMS

*Michel Cailleteau, Laure Feugère*

### PROBLEMS OF THE RESTORATION OF A FRAGMENT OF KOUANG KING ILLUSTRATION (MG 17 669)

This painting from Dunhuang belongs to the Musée National des Arts Asiatiques and is one of the oldest from Dunhuang, most probably from the eighth century. The *sūtra* of the contemplation of Amitāyus has been very often depicted on paintings and on the walls of sixty caves. Shan dao is said to have painted more than 200 representations of the Pure Land of Amitāyus, one of the oldest being on the wall of cave 393 (Sui period, 581—618).

Paradise is depicted in the centre, and on either side — Bimbisāra's and Ajātaśatru's stories and the vision of Queen Vaidehī, in which Śākyamuni himself teaches her sixteen meditations (sunset, water changed into ice, etc.). A palace and pavilions surround Amitābha's triad; on the terrace musicians are playing, accompanying a dancer.

Fragment MG 17669 offers a very interesting representation of this scene of paradise, however, its very poor condition made the interpretation of the painting rather difficult. Michel Cailleteau has achieved a remarkable result in the restoration of this painting, which now allows a better understanding of the scene.

In the upper part we can see two small Buddhas on clouds. The pavilions show a great economy of lines, but their bases are prominent. Amitābha is shown with a gesture of starting the wheel of the law. At the bottom, on the right, there is a *kinari* (human-headed bird) with two heads, similar to that in another representation of the Pure Land of Śākyamuni in London (Stein collection, ch. XXVIII 00—4). The eight representations of Bimbisāra's story on the right side follow the usual order in this type of paintings, while on the left only eleven scenes of the visions of Queen Vaidehī are partly discernable.

The painting is composed on four pieces of silk, sewn together; the largest piece is bordered on the left by a selva; another piece is sewn along the centre on 88 cm height, and a selva on the right side. Above are two small pieces, sewn together, of 17.5 cm width each (see *fig. 1*). The whole painting was framed by a stripe, some stitches of which are still visible on the selva.

Today its measurements have changed in comparison with those indicated by Nicolas Vandier in his “Bannières

de Touen Houang” (1976): height — 121 cm, and width is 88 cm, not 91.5 cm. The reason is that Michel Cailleteau has brought some shreds closer together. However, since the bottom part of the painting is missing, its original length remains unknown.

The work, an adhesive distemper painted on silk, is coated with a layer of several sheets of paper of Far Eastern origin, joined on the edges. This support appears to have been fixed along the edges on a wood pulp board.

At first sight, the work presents a species of a sequence of slashed strips arranged in a more or less parallel way, letting appear fragments of the personages of the Buddhist pantheon, and framing the face of the Buddha located in the middle of the axis of the composition. Otherwise, the composition would have been asymmetric and even anarchic in many places. Only an experienced eye of the expert could restore the geometry of the composition and the initial arrangement of the various iconographical elements.

One may suggest that the painting was in a critical condition at the time of its discovery, the silk support in particular being torn, dirty, and with a number of lacunae. An old restoration may have stopped some physical degradations, but, unfortunately, created many new others. The craftsman who sought to save the painting worked too fast and not enough carefully. As a result, the losses had increased. The painting's fragments were placed mostly at random in the course of time, often with overlappings, with a resulting confusion, which made it difficult the painting's reading. The situation had become even worse with the appearance of other changes: most of the colours, especially in the lower part, had darkened, largely because of putting adhesive during the first phase of the lining. Moreover, the adhesive had fixed irreversibly the dust accumulated during the centuries. The volume of the losses is too great to make the restoration of the original an easy work. It is to be noted that in addition to the paper's dusty look, its rather cold whitish tint, has spoiled the impression of delicate and shaded colours of the painting, weakened by previous alterations.

#### The restoration process

The condition of the painting seemed too poor to be improved. Besides, the general removal of the paper was impossible because of the silk's degradation. In this condi-

tions, the decoating was performed in a restricted manner: after the process of selection, according to their sizes which allowed safe handling, some pieces of painted silk have