

Comparison Between Painting and Sculpture of Eleven-headed Guanyin in the Northern Song Dynasty

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Abstract: The topic investigated is the eleven-headed Guanyin in the Northern Song Dynasty. Details of the arts are provided and analyzed. A comparison between its painting and statue is also made. The research is made to figure out their difference and analyze the details by observation and comparison, which is used to discover characteristics and distinctive features through the findings of differences and similarities. It aimed to find out which of the expression methods can deliver a clearer interpretation. Both the hanging scroll and the sculpture have their own upsides and downsides. They showed that no matter what the art expression is, Guanyin is a representation of compassion and mercy. Although expression forms are different, the same idea can be delivered. Also, it is found that the gender of Guanyin is based on its personification, which is compassion and kindness. So, this bodhisattva has been designed to be more like a woman since the Song Dynasty.

Keywords: Buddhism, Eleven-headed, Guanyin, Northern Song

1. Introduction

The painting of the eleven-headed Guanyin is from the Northern Song dynasty. It is a hanging scroll and is now in the Harvard Arts Museum (Figure 1). There are a great many inscriptions, either introducing characters or promoting morals of the arts. This is a distinctive feature of Chinese painting. The reformation of poetry and prose in the Northern Song Dynasty exerted influence over painting, thereby promoting and enhancing morals and further developing a school of painting done by amateur literati in that period [1]. The inscriptions are from the *Lotus Sutra's Universal Gate Chapter on Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva*. The main idea of the scroll is compassion. Guanyin is a bodhisattva of great compassion [2]. The inscriptions echo this idea.



Figure 1: Hanging scroll of the Eleven-headed Guanyin

The sculpture of the eleven-headed Guanyin is also from the Northern Song period (Figure 2). The eleven heads symbolize the Buddha's path to enlightenment [3]. Since the Song dynasty, the interpretation of Guanyin has become female. The reason is that other than compassion and being able to relieve suffering, Guanyin also has the power to grant children [4]. This characteristic is unique and can be observed from the statue.



Figure 2: Statue of Eleven-headed Guanyin

Although there were suppressions of Buddhism in the Tang and Song Dynasties, Buddhism flourished in these periods. Buddhist monks played a significant role in the flourishing. Emperors ruled and managed the country by merging Buddhist monks' religious thinking and policies [5]. Their thinking, for instance, etiquette education and central policy, affected the policies, religion, and social organization.

In this paper, the painting and sculpture of the Eleven-headed Guanyin from the aspects of appearance, decoration, gesture, and atmosphere are compared. For instance, interpretation and meanings behind, the representation of Guanyin. Using the method of comparison to find out differences and similarities of similar objects helps solve the question of their special characteristics in particular periods and sequences.

The question of Guanyin's gender can be confusing. This paper analyzes some information about it. This research can help enhance cultural understanding and cultural awareness about East Asian Buddhism and Chinese traditional painting characteristics.

2. Hanging Scroll of Eleven-headed Guanyin in the Northern Song

A unique eleven-headed Guanyin scroll was created in the Northern Song, with ink and color on silk, retrieved from Dunhuang. Its dimension is 99.6cm * 2.8cm. It is a complicated painting with many details. This scroll is now in the Harvard Arts Museum [6].

2.1. Analysis of the Inscriptions

Adding inscriptions to paintings is a tradition in China and most of the artworks have this feature. Figure 3 shows one of the inscriptions on the scroll. The inscriptions are from the *Lotus Sutra's Universal Gate Chapter on Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva*, which is a very significant and influential sutra in Buddhism. The translation of inscriptions on the scroll is listed and explained below. "Good Man, if all the countless hundreds of thousands of millions of living beings tormented by misery and pain hear of Gwan Shr Yin Bodhisattva, and with all their hearts invoke his name, Gwan Shr Yin Bodhisattva will immediately respond to their prayers and set them free [7]." That means if one follows Guanyin's spirit, one can be released from pain and can be set free. "If those who hold the name of Gwan Shr Yin Bodhisattva should fall into a great fire, the fire will not burn them, because of Gwan Shr Yin Bodhisattva's awesome spiritual power. If they are being tossed about in deep and treacherous waters and call his name, they will quickly reach the shallows [7]." That means one can be saved from danger and not be harmed by anything if one believes in Guanyin and calls his name. "If someone facing deadly harm recites Gwan Shr Yin Bodhisattva's name, the weapons of the assailants will break apart and he will get away [7]", the meaning is that one can be saved from deadly harm, the weapons of the enemy will break apart, if one believes in Guanyin. "If there is a person, whether innocent or guilty, who is locked in stocks or shackled by ropes and chains, his fetters will snap and fall away, letting him go free as soon as he invokes Gwan Shr Yin Bodhisattva's name [7]." One can enjoy freedom for eternity if he/she follows Guanyin's spirit, no matter who is.

These are found in the twenty-fifth chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*. This chapter is devoted to Avalokitesvara, describing him as a compassionate bodhisattva who hears the cries of sentient beings, and who works tirelessly to help those who call upon his name [8].

A portion of the long inscription is found beside a monk, it translates: "The late teacher, Yuanman, whose earthly name was Zhang, dedicated this with his whole heart." In the Song and Yuan dynasties (960-1368), the monks appeared throughout Chan texts, and they became a popular and recurring theme in art. The inscription added here is to emphasize Yuanman's faithfulness to Guanyin as a worshiper. In a nutshell, the inscriptions are used to emphasize Guanyin's spirit-compassion or maybe serve as teaching materials of Buddhism.



Figure 3: Extract of inscriptions on the hanging scroll

2.2. The Mudras of Eleven-headed Guanyin in Hanging Scroll

In Figure 4, circled in red are two types of mudras. Mudras are symbolic or ritual gestures or poses in Buddhism [9]. Mudras in this painting are performed by hand. There are two types of mudra in the painting, which are Vitarka mudra and Varada mudra. The former is in front of Guanyin's chest while the latter is beside his legs. They represent the action of teaching and compassion respectively [10]. Therefore, other than for decoration use or worship, this hanging scroll is more likely to be used for educational purposes and promotion of compassion.



Figure 4: Mudras of Guanyin

2.3. The Decorations in the Scroll

According to Figure 1, colorful decorations can be found around the Guanyin. First, a colorful and big flower canopy is found above the Guanyin. Then, a lotus flower is found for Guanyin to stand on.

The Lotus flower is a very significant feature in Buddhism. It is a representation of purity of speech and mind. In Chinese culture, a famous scholar Zhou DunYi appreciated lotus flowers “I love the lotus because while growing from mud, it is unstained”. Apart from these, there are gorgeous bracelets and necklaces worn by the Guanyin. For sculptures of Buddha, it is seldom to see that Buddha is wearing exquisite decoration. Paintings are different, it is a lot easier for artists to make the costumes colorful in a painting.

2.4. The Appearance of the Guanyin

From observation, the facial expression of the Guanyin looks nice, warm, and kind. This implies compassion. Apart from the mudras, he is holding plants and animals in both hands. They mean all living things and nature. This echoes another theory in Buddhism, which is from The Sūtra In Which The Buddha Speaks Of Immeasurable Life, a Buddha can deliver all living things from difficulty and save, and release them from suffering. The Guanyin’s appearance represents the ideas behind it, which are compassion and redemption.

3. Sculpture of Eleven-headed Guanyin in the Northern Song

The sculpture was created in the late Northern Song. It is made of wood with polychromy and cut gold. No obvious colors. Its height is around 218.5 cm. It has an obvious difference with the hanging scroll in the same period.

Firstly, the hanging scroll of Eleven-headed Guanyin and the sculpture have some similarities. By looking at the Guanyins’ facial expressions, both of them look very nice and warm looking. Even if the world is filled with suffering, wars, greed, cruelty, or anything, they have a compassionate heart.

Then, in the sense of the painting, the Guanyin is huge and wearing colorful clothes, surrounded by many other characters and exquisite decorations. All the other characters and decorations set off the importance of the Guanyin. There are inscriptions to explain and represent the main spirit of Guanyin. While, in the sense of the sculpture, it is simple but elegant. There are no special colors, and he is wearing cheap fabrics. This sculpture gives the impression that she has experienced the difficulties and suffering in the human world. Her hands are lost. However, it doesn’t seem to be broken or incomplete. In fact, she is a bodhisattva even if there are no mudras and a pretty dress. This echoes the idea in the Diamond Sutra, “If one sees all sorts of phenomena are not really the phenomena themselves, then one can see Tathāgata [11]”.

To sum up, the main point is that with a compassionate heart like the spirit of Guanyin, problems can be solved, and people can transcend challenges and be released from suffering. These might be the thoughts that the artists in that period wanted to deliver.

4. Discussion on Gender issues of Guanyin

Another interesting question that can be investigated more is the gender of Guanyin. By just observing Guanyin’s appearance in both the paintings and the sculpture, Guanyin looks more like a female. Representations of the bodhisattva in China before the Song dynasty (960–1279) were masculine in appearance. Images that later displayed attributes of both genders are believed to be in accordance with the Lotus Sutra, where Avalokitesvara has the supernatural power of assuming any form required to relieve suffering, and also has the power to grant children. Because this bodhisattva is considered the personification of compassion and kindness, a mother goddess and patron of mothers and seamen, it was further interpreted as an all-female in China around the 12th century. On occasion, Guanyin is also depicted holding an infant in order to further stress the relationship between the bodhisattva, maternity, and birth [12]. Thus, this can further prove that the appearance of Guanyin is considered and designed in order to show compassion.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, this research found that the eleven-headed Guanyin emphasized compassion and mercy significantly. Both art expression methods can show this representation successfully. For the painting, the ideas are shown in the inscriptions, mudras, facial expressions and minor characters. For the sculpture, the idea is shown in the facial expressions, appearance, and atmosphere. After the comparison, both art expression methods have their own upsides. They can both prove the theory of Guanyin's spirit mentioned in Buddhism sutras. Paintings can express thoughts more directly due to diverse elements and inscriptions. Together with the gender symbolism of Guanyin starting from Song and Yuan, it is more firm that Guanyin is a bodhisattva of infinite compassion. However, due to the vast amount of details in the scroll, some elements cannot be analyzed completely in the future research, Buddhist art in China can be compared with Buddhist art in other countries, for instance, Thailand.

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