

Anonymous (mid-17th century)

“White-robed Guanyin”

Hanging scroll, ink on silk
85.6 x 42.5 cm. (33 3/4 x 16 3/4 in.)

The figure is seated on a rock, her head covered with a cowl and robe flowing all around her, covering her hands and feet. She wears a necklace and holds a string of prayer beads that depend down between her legs. A ceramic or bronze vase holding a flower stands on an upright garden rock behind her.

The brushwork used for the drapery is strong and active, with sinuous curves and sharp-breaking angles contrasting effectively with the more finely drawn face, giving the figure an air of contemplative bliss.

The somewhat eccentric drawing relates to 17th century works by such masters as Cui Zizhong (1594/95-1644) and Chen Hongshou (1598-1652), suggesting a roughly comparative date for the present painting. Ink monochrome images of Guanyin were common during the 14th century Yuan dynasty and the contrast here between rough strokes for drapery and fine strokes for the face is found at least by the 10th century; the strong brushwork here can be held to have originated with 8th century Wu Daozi, characterizing the present artist as one who was aware of painting history and attempted in his own work to bring some of those strands together.

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白衣觀音圖

As Chen Hongshou noted: “Men of today do not study the ancients but rely on a few themes to establish their careers through plagiarism. When those of empty fame for delicate fineness wield the brush and do paintings, their brush and ink do not discharge their duties, and neither do their forms and likenesses compare (with those of their subjects) Alas! Seeking after fame by making points to people and by ridiculing or criticizing one’s successful elders is what I am most dissatisfied with in the currents of the famous...Those contemporary specialists who study Song painting lose out to craftsmanship. How so? They do not bring in the models of Tang. Those who study Yuan painting lose out to rusticity, for they do not search out the Song origins...I would like the famous current of painters to study the ancients, extensively inspecting Song painting and just into the Yuan; I would like the specialists to model themselves on Song men and entreat them to bring in the Tang...” The present painting, probably done by a specialist or professional master, would likely have won Chen’s approval for his approach here.