Ts'ai Shan (13th-14th century), attributed 傳蔡山

"Lohan Cutting Toenails" 羅漢圖

Hanging scroll, ink on silk
117 x 46 cm. (46 x 18 in.)

A lohan sitting on a rock beneath an overhanging tree grasps one of his bare feet, turning the toes upward for convenience in trimming the nails with the scissors held in his other hand. The posture of the figure, with one leg drawn up and the other bent at right angles beneath him, is standard for meditating lohan as is the rocky dais with shoes placed neatly at its base. The scene portrayed here seems to be unique, however, and is not known from any other published painting. In 8th century scenes of male and female ritual tonsure (figures 1-2), the heads of the initiates are being shaved by comrades acting as barber, which most likely represents the continuing reality of monastic practice from the 8th into the 14th centuries. In the present case, on the other hand, the monk is alone, and his attempts to trim his own beard and hair have produced uneven lengths, unsightly patches, and generally disastrous results. The effect is powerful, however, and suggests that the artist intended these distortions to dramatize the physical austerities and spiritual discipline that may be held to pave the way to the enlightenment manifested here by the circular halo centered on the lohan's head. The lohan appears to have interrupted his meditations in order to perform these more domestic chores, and one reading of the iconography may focus on the truism that enlightenment cannot be forced and that salvation can come at any moment, even when engaged in the most mundane of activities.

Fig. 1. Males being tonsured, Cave 445, Tun-huang, 8th century, after *Chung-kuo Mei-shu Ch'uan-chi, Hui-hua Pien*, Shanghai, 1988, vol. 15, pl. 74.

The name lohan is a shortened *form of a-lo-han*, the Chinese transliteration of Sanskrit *arhan* or *arhat*, meaning a worthy, venerable, and enlightened person. The original arhats were the direct disciples and followers of Siddhattha Gautama (ca.566-486/563-483 B.C.), the historic Buddha and first arhat. On his deathbed, Gautama, called Sakyamuni, is said to have counselled these disciples: "Decay is inherent in all compounded things; work out your salvation with diligence." Important here is the overt recognition of personal responsibility for one's salvation, for attaining enlightenment on one's own and thereby escaping the endless cycle of reincarnation brought about by the karma or effects of one's acts. An arhat or lohan was thus truly worthy of respect as the destroyer of his own future mortality. [1]

Fig. 2. Females being tonsured, Cave 445, Tun-huang, 8th century, after *Chung-kuo Mei-shu Ch'uan-chi, Hui-hua Pien*, Shanghai, 1988, vol. 15, pl. 75.

The rigorous discipline required by this individualistic approach must always have been of limited appeal, and the lohan thus remained associated primarily with Hinayana Buddhism, the "Lesser Vehicle," in contrast with Mahayana Buddhism, the "Greater Vehicle," which sought universal appeal through introduction of various bodhisattvas on whom one could call at will for assistance during one's quest. The attraction of

such compassionate saints is obvious, but over time their numbers grew to form a bureaucratic pantheon that was rivaled only by that of the imperial government, and the individual seeker may well have felt equally remote from both. The lohans, on the other hand, remained totally accessible, since they were not gods but rather men, and although they had sought their own salvation rather than the enlightenment of all beings, they could yet serve as positive, direct, and compelling models for those who lacked faith in the good will and beneficent grace of gods.

The earliest text known in China to mention lohan was the *Ju Ta-ch'eng Lun*, translated by the monk Tao-t'ai during the Northern Liang dynasty (397-439). [2] Paintings of lohan are recorded in association with two of the most famous artists of the Nanking-based Chin dynasty (265-420): Ku K'ai-chih (ca. 344-406) and Tai K'uei (d.395). This last artist also painted images of the Bodhisattva Kuan-yin, showing that little distinction was made early on between Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhism. Early records also suggest that, to begin with, the lohan were not distinguished from other eminent Indian monks and were not considered part of any standard numerical group; they thus could be represented individually, as was the case with Lu T'an-wei of the Liu-Sung dynasty (420-478), who painted an image of Ananda, the best-known disciple of Gautama, or Ku Pao-hsien and Shih Tao-shih of the same period, who each painted images of lohan identified only as Indian monks.

One precedent for the later standard numerical gouping of lohan was certainly the ten disciples of Chung-ni or K'ung-tzu, known in the West as Confucius. Such group images of the master and his immediate followers were rather popular during the Six Dynasties period and were painted by such major artists as Wang I of the Chin (265-42), Lu T'an-wei of the Liu-Sung (420-478), and Chang Seng-yu of the Liang dynasty (502-557). It was surely in response to the Confucian grouping that Mao Hui-hsiu of the Southern Ch'i (479-502) painted his "Ten Disciples of Sakyamuni." That gouping of ten—which in fact represented the perfect number, according to the *Hua-yen Sutra*—was continued during the following Liang dynasty (502-557), when Chang Seng-yu painted his "Ten Eminent Monks;" however, in another painting by the same artist, the group was expanded into what became the standard "Sixteen Lohan," sixteen being considered the perfect number in later, esoteric Buddhism. It was just at this same time that Bodhidharma (ca.470-543) arrived in Nanking and introduced the Ch'an or Meditation School of Buddhism, the sect with which paintings of lohan were closely associated ever after.

Believing that enlightenment was a personal matter, and could be neither taught nor learned, adherents of Ch'an eschewed most of the pantheon of deities developed in Mahayana Buddhism, retaining only Kuan-yin (Avalokitesvara) and Wen-shu (Manjusri), bodhisattvas who embodied characteristics required by everyone: wisdom and compassion. In the main, however, followers of Ch'an meditated in monasteries in company with images of those individuals who had successfuly completed the journey before them: Sakyamuni, patriarchs of the Ch'an sect, various other revered teachers, and the lohan. A further expansion in the standard number of lohan, to eighteen, is sometimes credited to a late 9th century painter named Chang Hsuan, but it was a contemporary of Chang's who has long been regarded as the greatest painter of lohan, the monk Kuan-hsiu (832-912). [3]

Although no paintings by Kuan-hsiu have survived, the designs of one set of lohan paintings attributed to him are preserved in stone engravings, images that circulated widely via rubbings (figure 3). As is generally true of early lohan images, the figure is large in relation to the format and is placed in an environment defined only summarily, with most attention devoted to the expressive physiognomy of the figure. During much of the succeeding

Fig. 3. Rubbing of stone engraving based on Kuan-hsiu's "Sixteen Lohan," detail, after Marsha Weidner, ed.: *Latter Days of the Law*, Lawrence, 1994, cat. 15, p. 263.

Fig. 4. Liu Sung-nien: "Lohan" 1207, after *Lo-han Hua*, Taipei, 1990, pl. 2, p. 10.

Fig. 5. Chao Ch'iung: "Lohan," after Wu Tung, *Tales from the Land of Dragons*, Boston, 1997, cat. 96, p. 89.

Fig. 6. Anonymous: "Rain of Flowers on Indian Monk," after *Lo-han Hua*, Taipei, 1990, pl. 7, p. 18.

Sung dynasty (960-1279), lohan were commonly placed in more elaborate contexts (figure 4), the additions often carrying religious connotations but also of beauty and interest in themselves. The fall of the Sung dynasty and the occupation of the entire country by the foreign Mongol dynasty encouraged many painters to reexamine the historical foundation of their art, occasioning a revival of earlier styles in religious art as well in landscape and other types of painting.

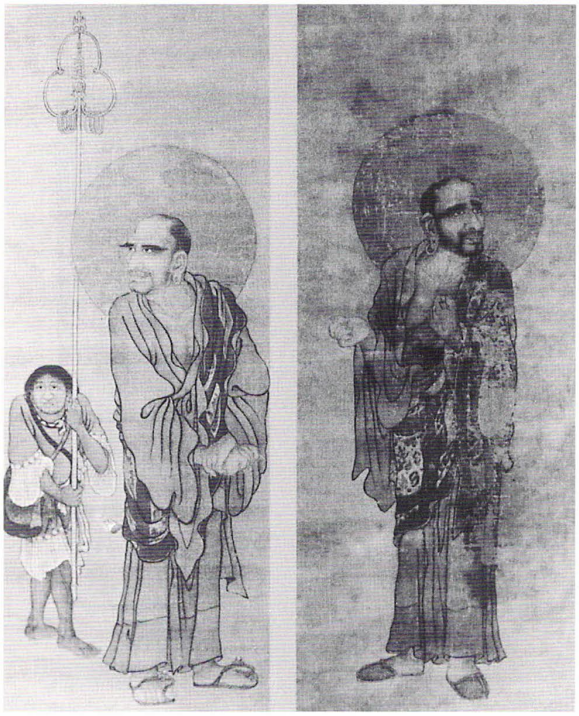

Fig. 7. Ts'ai Shan, att.: "Lohan," Tokai-an, Kyoto, after Suzuki Kei, ed.: *Comprehensive Illustrated Catalogue of Chinese Paintings*, Tokyo, 1983, vol. 4, no. JT1-002-11,12, pl. 2.

Chao Ch'iung, a professional artist working during the 13th century in Ning-po, an important port city engaged in the maritime trade with Japan, produced one set of lohan paintings (figure 5) that continues the Sung tradition of intricate detail, complex textile patterns, and strong color but places all of these in an environment as austere as that appearing in the stone engraving done after a painting by Kuan-hsiu. During the Yuan era foreigners from Central and Western Asian countries, India and Europe were to be found in China and an air of exoticism thus characterizes a good number of lohan paintings of the period (figure 6). This "Rain of Flowers on Indian Monk" of course is every bit as complex as a Sung image but others of the period (figure 7) present their subjects with no defining context at all and thus with iconic force and directness.

This last set of lohan is associated with an artist known as Ts'ai Shan, an

Fig. 8. Ts'ai Shan: "Lohan," Tokyo National Museum, after *Gendai no Kaiga*, Nara, 1998, cat. 59, p. 110.

Fig. 9. Ts'ai Shan: "Lohan," Tokyo National Museum, after *Gendai no Kaiga*, Nara, 1998, cat. 60, p. 111.

enigmatic figure to whom the present "Lohan Cutting His Toenails" may also be attributed on the basis of its very close similarity in size, style and conception to a pair of lohan paintings likewise done mainly in ink with only light use of color (figures 8-9). The first of these bears a hidden inscription reading *ts'ai-shan*, which may indicate that the painter's name was Ts'ai Shan or that he came from the area of Mount Ts'ai, of which two are known, one in Szechuan province and the other in Hupei. Ts'ai Shan is recorded only in the sixteenth century *Kundaikan Sayochoki*, the catalogue of the Ashigaka shogun's collection of paintings, but the sole bit of information given in that text is that the artist was a specialist in painting lohan. This simple fact was clearly based on the painting illustrated here in figure 8, since that work bears an inscription by Ashikaga Tadayoshi (1307-1352), brother of the first Ashikaga shogun who became a monk in 1349. The second painting known from this set (figure 9), until recently in a private collection but now in the Tokyo National Museum along with the other work, had interpolated inscriptions added on either side of the halo that were subsequently removed, returning the painting to its original simplicity and immediacy. The present painting is distinguished from the other two mainly by the presence of landscape elements at the top of the work and these too are likely the work of a somewhat later painter, probably added in Japan in the mistaken belief that more is always better.

1. Images of arhat are virtually unknown in India but they became quite common in China and subsequently in Japan, perhaps because of traditional veneration in East Asia for age and wisdom.
2. *Lo-han Hua*, Taipei, 1990, preface.
3. For a complete study of the life and art of this artist, see *Kaikodo Journal* III (Spring, 1997), cat. 4, p. 64; and Richard M. Barnhart: "Kuan-hsiu," in Herbert Franke, ed, *Sung Biographies: Painters,* Wiesbaden, 1976, pp. 55-61.