Anonymous (mid-13th century)

無名氏

"Bodhidharma on Tortoise"

達摩過海

Hanging scroll, ink on silk
98 x 44.5 cm. (38 1/4 x 17 1/2 in.)

Published:

Marsha Weidner, ed.: *Latter Days of the Law: Images of Chinese Buddhism 850-1850* (Lawrence: Spencer Museum of Art, 1994), cat. 20, p. 272.

Clad in a monk's robe, a single figure with shaven head glides over the water on the back of a tortoise, his ornamented beggar's staff in mid-air before him as though leading the way. The environment for this compelling image consists solely of coiling clouds above and roiling waves below, an awesome display of elemental forces that serves to convey the indomitable spirit of the traveler. The *khakkhara* or begging staff has a shaft of wood and an ornamental top with metal rings, the clashing of which gives notice of the monk's imminent arrival. The number of rings is sometimes held an indication of status, with two being associated with mortal sages and lohan and six—as here—with a bodhisattva.

The tortoise vehicle of the figure also characterizes him as a spiritual being of considerable power and authority. In very early times the shell of the tortoise was compared to the vault of heaven and its underside to the flat disc of the earth; thus representing the cosmos in miniature, the tortoise was given a prominent role in early methods of prognostication. Early representations of the tortoise include the banner recovered from the 2nd-century B.C. tomb at Ma-wang-tui (figure 1), where the spirit of earth stands on the back of an *ao* fish-turtle supporting the world above with the assistance of tortoises on either side. Given its genuine longevity, the tortoise was a natural symbol for immortality, with concomitant connotations of immutability and steadfastness, and human beings associated with the tortoise (figure 2) were assumed to possess the same characteristics. Imperial inscription tablets were also supported by tortoise-shaped bases (figure 3), thus making similar effective use of the same connotations. In the present case, then, the figure is visually defined as being immortal, with fixed and immutable purpose, the nobility of which is assured by the docility with which the tortoise bears its burden.

The figure here has been identified as a lohan—-one of the saints of Buddhism who have achieved enlightenment for themselves--and the

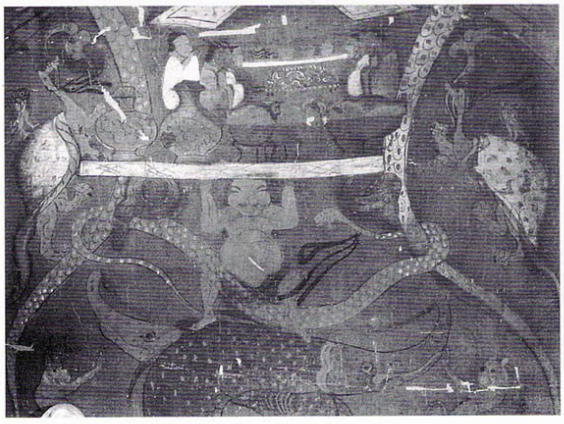

Fig. 1. Banner from Ma-wang-tui (detail), after *Chung-kuo Mei-shu Ch'uan-chi, Hui-hua Pien* (Shanghai: Jen-min, 1986), vol. 1, pl. 56, p. 71.

Fig. 2. Chao Yung, att.: "Scholar-immortal on Tortoise," after Kawakami Kei, *et.al.*: *Suiboku Bijutsu Taikei* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1975), vol. IV: *Ryōkai, Indara*, pl. 84, p. 111.

opened mouth and fixed expression of the figure do suggest the intensity of his inner transformation. The hands, however, are arranged in the *vitarka mudra*, with right palm forward and left upward, with the thumbs touching the middle fingers of each hand and the other digits extended, significant gestures associated with the historical Buddha Gautama preaching the Law. The jewelry worn by the present figure—the earring and bracelet—ensure that the image is not Sakyamuni himself and suggest rather that this is his emissary Bodhidharma (figures 4-5), the St. Paul of Buddhism who carried the good word of Ch'an/Zen Buddhism to China during the early 6th century. After an interview with the Liang emperor Wu-ti in 527, Bodhidharma crossed the river and traveled northward to Honan, a momentous event that is given tangible form in pictures such as the present.

Fig. 3. Li Ch'eng, att.: "Reading the Stele" (detail), after Oswald Siren: *Chinese Painting* (New York: Ronald Press, 1956), pl. 149.

"Bodhidharma on Tortoise" is a relatively conservative painting within the realm of Ch'an religious painting, with much attention paid to realistic detail and little of the expressionistic manipulation of form that characterizes later images. In this sense it can be compared with the 12th paintings of lohans attributed to Lu Leng-chia, which were most likely painted by a professional artist working at the Southern Sung court (figure 6). Additional clues to dating the painting are provided by the background, the splashing waves of which can be related to the scenes of water painted by Ma Yuan (figure 7) during the early 13th century. And from another type of art comes the best comparison of all, the fragment of a decorated jar with inscription dated to 1247. The present painting can thus be dated to the mid-13th century, the period during which many such works were sought out by Japanese visitors to China and brought home to provide spiritual sustenance and visual exhortation in their home temples.

Fig. 4. Anonymous: "Bodhidharma on Reed," after Kawakami Kei, *et.al.*: *Suiboku Bijutsu Taikei* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1975), vol. IV: *Ryōkai, Indara*, pl. 86, p. 113.

Fig. 5. Anonymous: "Bodhidharma," after Toda Teisuke, ed.: *Suiboku Bijutsu Taikei* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1973), vol. III: *Mokkei, Gyokkan*, pl. 50, p. 91.

Fig. 6. Lu Leng-chia, att.: "Lohan" (detail), after *Ku-kung Po-wu-yuan Ts'ang-hua Chi* (Beijing: Jen-min, 1978), vol. I, p. 61.

Fig. 7. Ma Yuan: "Water," after *Chung-kuo Mei-shu Ch'uan-chi, Hui-hua Pien* (Shanghai: Jen-ming, 1988), vol. 4, pl. 61, p. 88.

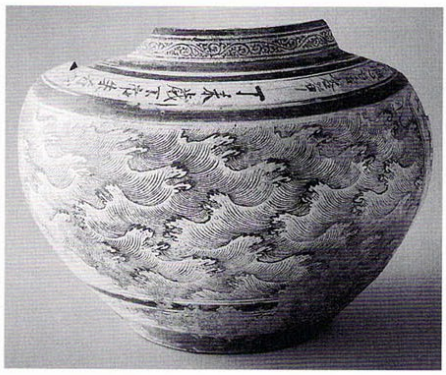

Fig. 8. Shard from Chi-chou jar dated 1247, after *Chung-kuo T'ao-tz'u Ch'uan-chi* (Shanghai: Jen-min, 1986), vol. 15, pl. 107.