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Khotanese art refers to the body of material evidence of pre-Islamic painting and sculpture unearthed in archaeological sites of the Khotan oasis (in the present-day Xinjiang-Uygur Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China), mainly in Buddhist ruined structures, or acquired in the local antique market.

Our knowledge of Khotanese art is still largely based on the materials brought to light by Marc Aurel Stein (q.v.) through the excavations he carried out in several sites of the oasis (Dandān Öilïq [q.v.], Balawaste [q.v.], Khadalik, Farhad Beg Yailaki, Tarishlak, Domoko [see DUMAQU], Rawak Vihara [q.v.], to name the major ones), during the first two decades of the 20th century (Stein, 1907; 1921, chaps. IV and V; 1928, chap. IV, sections i-iii). Further discoveries, but on a more limited extent, were made by the expeditions led by members of the Count Ōtani Kōzui team (1902-4), and by Ernst Trinkler, from Bremen (Germany), in the 1920s (Gropp). In the same years, a significant amount of fragments of murals and sculpture, as well as other artifacts, was acquired by Stein, Trinkler, Nikolay F. Petrovskiy, and other Westerners from local dealers (for the British collections, cf. Waugh and Sims-Williams; for the Petrovskiy collection, see Elikhina, 2010-11); apart from the alleged sites of provenance, for the bulk of these fragments the original architectural and iconographic contexts are unknown.

After a long hiatus, archaeological fieldwork was resumed in the Khotan oasis in the 1990s, with new excavations at Dandān Öilïq by Christoph Baumer and

by Sino-Japanese expeditions (Zhang, Qu, and Liu; *Dandan wulike yizhi*), and more recently (2010s) with investigations in the Domoko area, in the eastern portion of the oasis (Chinese expedition, cf. *Dandan wulike yizhi*, pp. 293-333; *Buddhist Vestiges*). The Sino-French diggings at Karadong, on the Keriya (q.v.) river, just beyond the north-eastern fringes of the Khotan oasis, also deserve to be mentioned for the remarkable mural paintings brought to light in two Buddhist temples (Debaine-Francfort and Idriss; see below).

The main collections of Khotanese artistic finds are currently housed in the following locations: the British Museum, the National Museum in New Delhi, the Übersee-Museum in Bremen, the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, the Tokyo National Museum, and the National Museum of Korea in Seoul; as to Xinjiang, Khotanese artifacts are kept in the Xinjiang Archaeological Institute in Urumchi, the Hetian Cultural Museum in Khotan city, as well as in other minor museums (e.g., Domoko).

In Khotanese Buddhist temples, all reproducing essentially one and the same architectural layout (a central shrine surrounded by one or more corridors for ritual circumambulation), sculpture and painting were complementary artistic media. The central shrine usually housed one major sculpture (or sculptural group) on a pedestal, whereas the walls of the shrine and corridors were entirely covered with paintings of religious themes. In some cases, the two media were more organically combined, with painting providing a background to clay sculptures in high relief (Rawak), as seen in late Gandharan Buddhist sites (e.g., Hadda, Afghanistan).

However fragmentary, the material record on pictorial arts confirms what ancient written sources indicate about the prevailing doctrinal orientation in Khotan, described as a prestigious center of Mahāyāna Buddhism (see BUDDHISM i. IN PRE-ISLAMIC TIMES). Along with the Buddha, by far the most favorite subject, we find depictions of Bodhisattvas (q.v.), *lokapāla*s, minor deities, frequently of ultimate Brahmanical origin, and worshippers. Apart from sporadic depictions of local legends (in painting), Khotanese art shows no interest in narrative themes.

Sculpture. A group of baked clay figurines from Yotkan and other sites of the oasis, traditionally assumed to date from a relatively early period (4th-5th centuries CE), based on similarities with Gandharan art (q.v.), may represent the earliest known evidence of Khotanese art altogether. A rich collection of terracotta figurines, both human (male figures, often playing on musical

instruments) and animal (most frequently monkeys), either self-standing or originally applied to pots, is housed in the Hermitage Museum (D'iakonova and Sorokin; Elikhina, 2008 and 2010-2011).

The bulk of Khotanese sculpture is represented by clay images, in which the legacy of late and post-Gandharan art and the close contacts with the sculpture of the Upper Indus Valley and Kashmir (cf. Forte, 2015), along with the Gupta elements these traditions had absorbed, are patent in iconography, style and workmanship. On the other hand, its relationship with other artistic centers of the Tarim Basin has not yet received the attention it deserves.

As a rule, in Khotanese Buddhist temples a major cult image, typically a large sculpture of the Buddha, was placed on a pedestal either in the middle of the shrine (more frequently closer to its rear wall) or, in some cases, in a niche in the rear wall. Sculptures of the Buddha, Bodhisattvas or *lokapāla*s, depending on the ritual and iconographic program, could also be added in the corners of the cella or in rows along its walls, on bases or benches. With the exception of Rawak (see below), where a number of whole images were also preserved, clay sculptures have generally been recovered in an extremely fragmentary state of preservation.

Plate I. Clay sculptures at the Rawak stūpa. After Aurel Stein, Sand-Buried Ruins of Khotan, London, 1903, frontispiece.

The site of Rawak stands out for the impressive display of clay images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas (PLATES I, II), disposed in an uninterrupted row along the wall surrounding the square sacred area, and on what remained of a thin outer wall preserved only at the southwestern corner of the enclosure (Stein, 1907, pp. 304-6, 482-506; Gropp, pp. 13-16, 221-42; Rhie, pp. 276-315). Although its ambitious iconographic program cannot be entirely reconstructed (only the southwestern and most of the southeastern sides of the wall have been dug), we know that the sculptures were differentiated in size, possibly on

a hierarchical base, and that included colossal images of the standing Buddha (ca. 3 m high), in three cases encircled by a large mandorla filled with rows of small standing or seated Buddhas (Stein, 1907, fig. 62, pl. XVIIIc). This iconographic formula was popular at Qizil and other sites of the Kucha (q.v.) oasis (late 6th – first half of the 7th centuries, cf., for instance, Howard and Vignato, figs. 134-38); in the south of the Tarim Basin, it is found at Endere, east of Khotan (mural painting in shrine E.ii, late 7th-early 8th centuries CE, Stein, 1907, pl. X). Sculptural fragments belonging to similar representations of the Buddha are also known from other sites of the Khotan oasis (small standing or seated Buddhas and fragments of mandorlas, e.g., at Dandān Öilïq, late 7th-8th centuries, cf. Whitfield and Farrer, p. 165). These parallels, along with evident links to the late Buddhist art and architecture of the Gandharan area, Hindu Kush (q.v.), and Ṭoḵarestān—including the large “star-shaped” or “cruciform” *stūpa*—disprove the chronology assigned to Rawak (4th to mid-5th centuries CE, cf. Rhie, pp. 276-315, to mention the most recent reappraisal), making the period between the 6th to 8th centuries CE a more reasonable option.

Plate II. Rawak, head of Buddha (6th-7th century). Red clay with traces of color, 25.4 x 17.8 x 17.8 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1930, accession no. 30.32.3. Image in the public domain.

Painting. This category is represented by murals (preserved either *in situ* or in fragments), and wooden painted panels (Williams; Whitfield; Whitfield and Farrer). The latter, of rectangular shape, often with a triangular top, were placed as votive offerings in front of the pedestals of major sculptures in Buddhist shrines (PLATE III). In most cases, both faces of the panel were decorated with one or more cult images (Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, deities, or legends).

Plate III. Votive panel from the Khotan oasis (Xinjian, China). The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, former Petrovskii Collection, Inv. GA-1120. Illustration reproduced by permission of the State Hermitage Museum.

As to mural paintings, due to the generally poor state of preservation of the walls, we are better informed on a variety of single subjects (testified by a great number of fragments) than on the compositional contexts they belonged to (PLATE IV). We can nonetheless surmise that the iconographic programs of Khotanese Buddhist shrines mainly included images of the Buddha of variable size, standing or seated on lotus blossoms, accompanied, in a range of different schemes, by Bodhisattvas and/or deities. Among the most frequent compositions is the one conventionally named “Thousand Buddhas” (the earliest known evidence of which is found in the paintings of Ajanta, in India, late 5th century CE), occupying the upper portion of the walls or their entire surface: rows of small images of the seated Buddha, differentiated by the direction to which their heads are turned, the symbolic gesture (*mudrā*) they perform, or the color of their mantle.

Plate IV. Mural painting from Toplukdong Site no. 1 (Domoko): the lokapāla Sañjaya. Photograph courtesy of Guo Wu (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences).

We owe to Joanna Williams the most accurate and comprehensive analysis of

the iconographic repertoire of Khotanese painting, whereas the new evidence provided by recent excavations helps to clarify the context of certain specific subjects, earlier documented by isolated and sporadic fragments.

The Buddha Vairocana was one of the most favorite cult images in the Khotan oasis, both in wall paintings and in painted wooden panels. The subject, which has been traced to the *Avataṃsakasūtra*, a Buddhist text which enjoyed large popularity in Khotan, can be described as a cosmic representation of Śākyamuni, standing or seated, wearing a simple loincloth (instead of the canonical cloak) and with a variety of emblems and motifs (not all of which have been satisfactorily explained) drawn on different parts of his body.

A number of Khotanese depictions of the Buddha have been tentatively assigned to the category of the "Auspicious Images", i.e., painted reproductions of sculptures of Buddha, Bodhisattvas or Buddhist narratives traditionally held to have "flown" from India to Central Asia and East Asia. Such sculptures as well as their painted reproductions were thought to be endowed with miraculous power. Mentions of "Auspicious Images" of the Buddha at Khotan are found in the accounts of the Chinese pilgrims Songyun and Xuanzang, who visited the oasis in the 5th and in the 7th century respectively (for a recent overview of "Auspicious Images" at Dunhuang [q.v.], and their close relationship with Khotan, see Anderl).

Among the Bodhisattvas, Avalokiteśvara (q.v.) has been identified in a good number of fragments (mainly on account of the image of the Buddha Amitābha in his headdress); more sporadic and hypothetic are the depictions of Maitreya and other Bodhisattvas. As to the *lokapāla*s, Vaiśravaṇa and Sañjaya, both objects of special worship as protectors of Khotan, have been identified in murals and in painted wooden panels (on Sañjaya, see Forte, 2014).

Our understanding of the role played by Brahmanical deities in Khotanese Buddhism, already witnessed in Stein's record (images of Maheśvara and Gaṇeśa), has been improved by the wall paintings unearthed during recent diggings at Dandān Öilïq (temple D 13: Baumer; temple CD 4: Matsumoto, ed., pp. 71-79, Zhang, Qu, and Liu, p. 158, fig. 5, color plate 5; temple CD 10: *Dandan wulike yizhi*, pl. 9). In particular, groups of male (first and foremost Skanda/Kārttikeya, in one case, temple D 13, along with Maheśvara and, probably, Mahākāla) and female deities (including the goddess Hārītī as well

as animal-headed figures) shed light on the worship of *graha*s, i.e., spirits harmful to pregnant women as well as to children, in a Buddhist context (Lo Muzio, 2017; 2019).

The current view on the chronology of Khotanese painting (late 7th-8th century) largely follows Stein's reconstruction, based on a *terminus ante quem* (late 8th century) provided by dated Chinese documents from Dandān Öilïq, on the one hand, and on common sense, on the other. Even considering a range of stylistic and iconographic variations, the general consistency among the materials found in different sites of the oasis (Dandān Öilïq, Balawaste, Khadalik, Tarishlak, Farhad Beg Yailaki, Domoko) is good evidence for dating them to the same chronological span; also, the artistic homogeneity among mural paintings and wooden painted panels should discourage the hypothesis to dissociate them with regard to chronology (cf. Whitfield, who accepts a late date for murals, but assigns the wooden panels to the 6th century, pp. 158-65, nos. 130-35). Even if we have a chronological sketch of Khotanese painting, a finer periodization is still lacking; furthermore its formative stages are poorly known. The paintings found at Karadong, northwest of the Khotan oasis, on the Keriya river, show idiosyncratic traits in iconography and style; at the same time they have much in common with late Khotanese artistic and ritual context, to begin with the iconographic program and lexicon. A date in the 3rd century, as proposed by their discoverers, based on radiocarbon testing (Debaine-Francfort and Idriss, p. 82), seems therefore too early, and it is not corroborated even by the elements of Classical origin highlighted in the ornamental repertoire (meander) and iconography (the gesture of "Lateran Sophocles", in which some of the Buddhas are portrayed), as these are recorded in the Khotan oasis and elsewhere in the Tarim Basin as late as the 6th to 8th centuries CE.

Better candidates for an earlier dating are the fragments of murals brought to light by uncontrolled diggings in the east of the Domoko area, representing a garland supported by plump, haloed *amorini* and, only in one fragment, part of a possible narrative scene. The Domoko fragments seem to recall nothing of what we know of Khotanese iconography and style. The findings are known from a cursory description, with a tentative chronology (2nd-3rd centuries CE), based on generic resemblances with Gandharan art (*Buddhist Vestiges*, pp. 118-27). A thorough iconographic and stylistic analysis may help to better define the art-historical and chronological context the Domoko *amorini* belong to.

Our knowledge of Khotanese art would surely benefit both from further fieldwork, hopefully based on scientific methods, and from a finer art historical investigation on the material unearthed so far, aimed at an assessment of diversity in style, iconography and technical features. A much desirable goal is also a comprehensive analysis of the links between Khotanese art and the production of other leading artistic centers both in the Tarim Basin, first and foremost the Kucha oasis, and out of its boundaries (Gandharan area, Hindu Kush, and western Central Asia, in particular Ṭoḳarestān).

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