

# Tales of Eccentric Exemplars: Visual Narratives in Chan Buddhist Paintings from 13-14<sup>th</sup> century China

Background Notes

*Malcolm McNeil - 1 Oct 2014*



## Guanyin 觀圖

Muqi Fachang 牧法 (act. Ca. late13-14<sup>th</sup> C. died after 1279)

Hanging scroll, ink and light colours on silk, 171.9 x 98.4 cm

Daitokuji 大寺, Kyoto

Signature, lower left:

Made with reverence by  
Fachang, monk of Shu  
蜀法謹

Two seals:

Muqi 牧 (relief)

Dōyū 道有 (relief), Collectors seal of  
Ashikaga Yoshimitsu 足利義満  
(1358-1408).



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# **Tales of Eccentric Exemplars: Visual Narratives in Chan Buddhist Paintings from 13-14th century China**

## **Abstract**

Chan Buddhism, more widely known through its Japanese incarnation of Zen, was one of the most animated and expressive sources of subject matter for painters of Southern Song and Yuan dynasty China (1127-1368). The Chan pantheon was given form in the expressive brush strokes of artists from the cloisters of Chan monasteries, imperial courts, and elite literati society. Unlike much of the iconography of earlier Chinese Buddhism, these figures were anything but static. Chan masters bested Confucian officials in bouts of witty wordplay, crossed great rivers and mountain ranges in miraculous feats that mirrored their spiritual accomplishments, and found enlightenment in the mundane tasks and occurrences of the everyday.

This talk will explore the visual narratives through which Chan's eccentric exemplars evolved and developed in Song and Yuan China. Through an exploration of variation in pictorial style and content, alongside translations of the prose and verse inscribed upon and alongside the paintings' surfaces, we see the variety of meanings these images held for the lives of secular and clerical audiences.

## The History of Chan Buddhist Painting

Chan Buddhism, better known through its Japanese inheritor of Zen, traces its historic origins in China back to the semi-mythical person of Bodhidharma, an Indian prince of the sixth century. Bodhidharma has been retrospectively credited with founding a tradition of Chinese Buddhism based on meditative introspection, whose lineages of patriarchs and exemplars flourished over the following centuries. This form of Buddhism, known as Chan, sought to distinguish itself as 'a teaching outside of the scriptures, not reliant on words'. It was the person of the patriarch rather than the canonical texts of Buddhist antiquity that facilitated the enlightenment of subsequent generations, termed 'a transmission from mind to mind'. As a living conduit for the continuation of Chan teachings, these historic exemplars became the subject matter of a rich tradition of figural painting. The earliest surviving examples of these artworks date from the late 12th century, flourishing in the following 13 and 14th centuries under the Han Chinese Song Dynasty, and the Mongol Yuan. The majority of surviving examples of this dynamic tradition of painting are preserved in Japan, collected for the most part by Japanese pilgrims who came to study at the feet of prominent masters in continental China. Through a selection of works from this surviving body of material, this lecture explores the rich stylistic variety of paintings of Chan subjects that narrate the origins of Chan Buddhism through the exemplary and eccentric deeds of its pantheon. These paintings capture dramatic moments from stories familiar to their 13-14th century viewers, complemented by eloquent poetic commentaries in cursive calligraphic inscriptions brushed by senior abbots upon their surface.



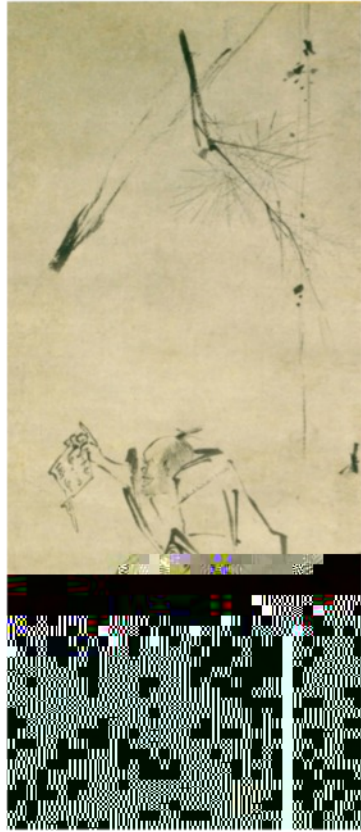
**Sixth Patriarch Chopping Bamboo** 六截圖

**Liang Kai (late 12th–early 13th C.)**

Southern Song (1127-1279)  
Hanging scroll, ink on paper,  
72.7 x 31.8 cm

Tokyo National Museum  
Important Cultural Property  
重文財

Signature, 'Liang Kai 梁楷'



**'The Sixth Patriarch Tearing up Sutras'** 六破圖

**Liang Kai (late 12th–early 13th C.)**

Hanging Scroll, ink on paper,  
73 x 31.7 cm.

Mitsui Takamaru Memorial  
Museum, Tokyo 三記美館

Signature, 'Liang Kai 梁楷'

## **Styles of Chinese figure painting, and their development in Chan art**

The history of Chinese painting stretches back over several thousand years, its earliest record preserved in archaeological finds from elite tombs. By the fourth century CE painters were elevated above their earlier artisanal status. Texts on the theory of painting were authored by painters in reflexive commentaries upon the process and practice of painting that are still deeply relevant to the arts of China today. By the 13th century, the purpose of image making had moved beyond representation to a consideration of the conceptual expressive capacity of visual form. In certain elite circles, the creation of an image was thought of as a reflection upon the character of its maker. This was particularly prevalent in paintings made in ink without colour. The majority of surviving figure paintings of Chan subjects are in this media, exploring the rich potentials of ink on silk and paper to evoke a panoply of forms and textures.

One of the most characteristic styles of Chan figure painting was 'apparition painting', so called because of its ethereal aesthetic that alluded to the presence of the painted icon without lending it concrete form. The early 13th century painter monk Zhiweng Ruoqing has been credited as one of the early masters of this style, with a small number of extant works preserving the subtle variations in tone and texture that he mastered over the course of his career. Later artists, such as the court painter turned eccentric individualist Liang Kai (active late 12-early 13th century) are credited with further technical explorations of the brush arts. Liang's depictions of Chan subjects were frequently drawn in what is termed the 'abbreviated brush style', where a kinetically charged paucity of strokes constructed powerfully dynamic images of Chan patriarchs. Two such examples are found in a diptych showing two representations of Chan's sixth patriarch preserved through Japanese collections. These two works juxtapose the dramatic iconoclastic act of tearing

up of sutras, with the mundane daily task of chopping bamboo. The late 13 to early 14th century monk painter Muqi Fachang built upon these earlier styles in a somewhat more restrained and meticulous approach to ink painting. His works have been canonised in Japanese collections, inspiring direct copies and setting a stylistic precedent for generations of later artists in the archipelago. The veneration of such works is most clearly apparent in his iconic triptych of the Bodhisattva (Buddhist figure of salvation) Guanyin, flanked by a cranes and a pair of gibbons, preserved in the Daitokuji Zen temple in Kyoto.

## **The integration of poetry, painting and calligraphy in Chan icons**

The rich visual rhetoric of Chan painting in China did not develop in isolation. The expressive painted depictions of the Chan pantheon were augmented with inscriptions of calligraphy upon the surfaces of paintings. Drawn in dark, dense ink atop the images of historic sages, these inscriptions record the verses of senior Chan abbots that speak for the iconic subjects of the painting. This combination of poetry, calligraphy and painting was known as the three perfections in pre-modern China. The cultural luminaries of the tenth century had established strong cases for the integral nature of these arts, describing the creative processes of the painter as equivalent to that of the poet, while later artists integrated the formal qualities of calligraphy into their ink paintings to illustrate the overlap between these linked processes of creative expression. The arts of the Chan monastery were no exception to this. Abbots combined their inscriptions with the visual language of painting to create dynamic interplays between form and content of calligraphy, painting and poetry. Through this combination of eloquent visual and verbal rhetoric, these inscribed paintings of ancient exemplars animate a complex tradition of religious practice and cultural expression.

## **Malcolm McNeill**

Malcolm McNeill is a PhD candidate at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). He has written on Chan painting for the V&A exhibition catalogue *Masterpieces of Chinese Painting 700-1900* (2013), and lectured on modern and pre-modern Chinese art for various museums and institutions in the UK and Asia. He curated the 'Treasures of the National Palace Museum' lecture series at Asia House in 2012-13, and has worked as a research assistant on the British Museum exhibition 'Ming: Fifty Years that Changed China'.



**Zhiweng 直 (act. first half 13th c.)**

Before 1263 Southern Song  
1127-1279

Ink on paper 91.8 x 28.8 cm

Inscription: Yanqi Guangwen  
偃廣 (1189-1263)

Private Collection, Tokyo

Important Cultural Property  
重文財

***Inscription:***

Floating floating travels, wave  
and wave of walking,

Twisting your cranium and  
turning your head, how many  
playful revelations?

Before the jade pavilion, after  
Sudana has gone,

In this place of green green  
grass, will you still be known?

Requested by a man with  
superior understanding of Chan

*Yanqi Guangwen of Jingshan*