

Henry H. Hart  
Oriental Art  
328 Post Street  
San Francisco

December 9, 1932

Mrs. Gertrude Bass Warner,  
Director,  
University of Oregon,  
Museum of Art,  
Eugene,  
Oregon.

My dear Mrs. Warner:

I was very pleased to receive your letter of December 6<sup>th</sup>. and to learn that you are interested in the frescoes which I brought back with me from China this past Spring.

I shall try to answer your questions as categorically as possible.

1. It is impossible to tell how many sections there were in the original group of frescoes. No record exists to describing the fresco, so we cannot know the entire scene. Over half of the sections were broken during the process of removal from the wall of which they were a part—this loss has occurred [sic] everywhere in China when frescoes are removed.
2. As far as the frescoes remaining show, the scenes were of adoration of Kuan Yin, showing Boddhisattvas [sic] in kneeling position, offering incense and lotus-flowers. Other parts show Boddhisattvas [sic] journeying through the heavens, and still others (these are smaller, horizontal pieces, now on exhibit at the Legion of Honor Museum here), show miracles worked by Kuan Yin in saving people from death.
3. The period of the fresco is late Sung or Yüan.
4. You ask for my authority for my information. If it is with reference to the dating of the frescoes, my authority is a study over a period of fourteen years in China, with Chinese scholars and connoisseurs, plus a careful study of all that has appeared in Western countries with reference to frescoes. This latter material has been very scarce up to the present time. However, from all authorities, we know that gesso work—that is, accentuation of part of the fresco by means of plaster applied as though from a pudding tube on the surface and colored, did not occur during the T'ang period. Therefore these pieces cannot be T'ang. Next, we know that the Sung era thought of and created the Boddhisattva type in female form, the Ming period

reverting in large part to the masculine conception of the idea. Moreover, the Ming form has certain characteristics and colors peculiar to it. These are more particularly a loss of ability to represent the human figure in simple flowing line, resulting in a wealth and often a weight of drapery in the Ming frescoes, with heavier colorings, rather than the light, slender figures of the Sung frescoes. The Ming head-dresses become heavier, too, and the whole conception of these supernatural beings has something heavy about it lacking the grace of line and lightness in feeling of the Sung pieces.

In addition to this information I have two small articles written out for me by the two best-known connoisseurs of frescoes in North China. Nothing is known in Chinese literature on frescoes (which they call simply “ni pi”—mud paintings) and what is known by collectors has been handed down by oral tradition.

According to the statement made by the collectors from whom I bought these sections of fresco, they originated in the Hsing T’ang Temple, near Chiang Chou, in Shansi Province. The Chinese reads as follows: “Shansi, Chiang Shou, I San Hsien, East Wall, South sixteen li, Hsiao Ni village, Hsing T’ang Temple, five li from village.” This temple was famous as being that to which the T’ang Emperor, Ming Huang, retired shortly after the death of his favorite concubine, Yang Kuei Fei. He became a monk and died in this temple. This information was substantiated by experts who examined the frescoes while I was in Peking this Spring.

Tradition assigns Chu Hao Ku as the painter of these frescoes.

In 1931 Fêng Yu Hsiang ordered the secularizing of the temple and its conversion into a school. At that time the frescoes were sold as a whole, removed from the wall, and taken to Peking, where I found them on my last visit, in February of 1932.

As above stated, these pieces were authenticated by Chinese experts, and I have one statement written in Chinese. This I have translated. In Japan enlarged photographs were studied and passed by Mr. Harold Henderson, for thirteen years on the staff of the Metropolitan Museum of New York, now engaged in further research work. In San Francisco they were seen by Mr. Shiota, who [sic] stated to me that they were as fine as any he had ever [sic] seen. They were also seen here by the world-famous collector, General Muenthe, of the Peking gendarmerie, who likewise pronounced them genuine, by Edgar Walter, by M. Pascal Bonetti, Director of the Beaux-Arts and of the Louvre, by Miss McLane, Curator of the Honolulu Art Academy, and by various other curators. One has been acquired by the Fuller Museum of Seattle, two by the Louvre in Paris, one by the Museum of the Legion of Honor, here in San Francisco (in addition to which Mr. Albert Bender has just given another to the same institution), two are in the University of California and several are in private [sic] collections.

I shall be glad to give you other notes, such as the preparation of the walls, the type of colors used, the method of removal, etc., in case you decide to go further into the matter.

Mrs. Hart and I are happy that you enjoyed your visit to our store and hope that we may soon have the pleasure of seeing you here again.

Very sincerely yours,

Henry H. Hart

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P.S. You may be interested in reading a paragraph of the letter received from M. Henri Verne, Director of the National Museums of France, after the fresco acquired by them had been received and inspected by the French and Chinese experts of Paris.

“Les deux fresques chinoises prendront place au Musée’ [sic] du Louvre, dans les Collections du Département des Arts de l’Asie, au développement duquel nous apportons des soins d’une importance chaque jour grandissante.”

*Letter from Henry H. Hart To Gertrude Bass Warner, Gertrude Bass Warner papers, UA 022, Box 010, Folder 04, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon. Transcribed by Liam Maher.*