

Article

The Other Laocoön: How Artworks Become Canonical or Fail to Do So?

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Abstract: The classical *Laocoön and His Son* (ca. 50 CE), rediscovered in 1506 in Rome, is arguably the most illustrious artwork anchoring the entire canon of art history. Less is known about the eighth-century Chinese *Laocoön* that predates the Italian rediscovery of the classical prototype by seven centuries. The tale of the two *Laocoöns* is a story of canon formation: the Italian work becomes one of the best-known artworks in the world; the Chinese one is hardly known. Why should that be the case? How do artworks become canonical? How does art acquire its canon? Does canon necessarily mean a collection of exemplary artworks? Or is canonization largely a process of ranking artists and corraling object-centered narratives? Is the Western concept of canon universally applicable or are there other ways of canonization that lead to a canon without particular objects? For these questions, the long history of Chinese art provides answers.

Keywords: art history; canon formation; Laocoön; sculpture; images; Chinese art history; global art history; aesthetics; European art history; international exhibition; canon of art; Buddhist art; art criticism; Asian art

1. Is the Idea of Canon Passé?

The question of canon has a comeback just as we think it might run out of steam.¹ It was, in the field's collective memory, a hot-button issue that consumed a considerable amount of polemic passion in the 1990s. The polemic energy animated by the issue has since quieted down somewhat. Not because of its irrelevance; rather, a consensus appears to have been achieved. Back then, the question pivoted around the exclusivity and inclusivity of the art historical canon. Centered on the Euro-American master narrative, it was seen as unconscionably exclusive, keeping women and non-Western art at bay. Decades later, the case appears to have been sealed. Few would contest the need for an expanded global canon.

More recently, however, the focus of the discussion has shifted to something more radical, namely, questioning whether a canon is needed at all. Much as the dismissal of canon has gained some momentum, the resilience of the canon has surprised many. A double game has been afoot, though rarely realized or acknowledged. Museums may frequently hold temporary or special exhibitions featuring non-Western artists normally kept out of the canonic spotlight. These remain a passing fancy. They rarely fundamentally reshape or alter the content of the museums' permanent collections. When it comes to museum acquisition, curators still hold onto the implicit canonical standard they have long been standing by. The canon dies hard. Featuring non-Western artists in textbooks and curatorial practices often flaunts the "otherness". Once the "otherness" has worn out, the works propping it up have run their course. They either return to where they are



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or disappear into oblivion. In fact, showcasing “otherness” itself has become an easily executable mechanism. It really doesn’t change the canon. There has been strong advocacy for multiple canons. However, we all know that not all canons are created equal. That inequality remains a fact that continues to be reckoned with.

What does that leave us? It becomes increasingly clear that to have a more expansive canon, the key is not to stay at the level of doing the numbers. Token representations carry insincerity. Rather, what matters is to develop a meta-canon field to relativize canonicity, so that over time, the unthinking adherence to the canon dissolves and a criticality is formed. To that end, it is essential that we understand the mechanism of canon formation: why and how it happens. Why are some artworks exalted as canonical works and others not?

2. Two Laocoöns

The best case to answer the questions above is to begin with two Laocoöns. One is *Laocoön and His Sons*, ca. 50 CE., arguably one of the best-known classical canonical statues of all time (See Figure 1); the other is a little-known eighth-century Chinese variation of the classical Greek artistic design and *formal* prototype (See Figure 2), a segment of the massive eighth-century relief sculpture that covers the relic pagoda of the Xiuding Temple in China (See Figure 3).

The affinity between the two is striking. Their connectivity may well go beyond mere formal resemblance. While the Laocoön Group dates back to the 2nd century BCE, it did not come to light until 1506. The world’s renewed attention to Greek sculpture began in 1506 when it was unearthed. There is a big question about the 1600-year gap between the Greek conception of the work—in view of its artistic design and formal modeling—in the first century BCE and the Renaissance rediscovery in the sixteenth century. The eighth-century Chinese sculpture fills that gap. The East–West connection here in terms of the propagation of an artistic design and the formal prototype is tantalizing. The sculptural program in which it is embedded ostensibly shows traits of the art and culture of the “Western Regions” both iconographically and stylistically. It may well be a distant variation of the *formal* prototype defined by the Greek *Laocoön* Group in broad daylight, created some seven centuries before the *Laocoön* was rediscovered in Rome in the sixteenth century. To that end, it should be considered the single most relevant milestone in the global genealogy of the *Laocoön and His Sons*. What concerns us here, however, is not the reconstruction of the route of transmission of a Greek formal prototype and its Chinese variation. Rather, the case galvanizes the question of canon formation. Given their ties to the second-century *Laocoön*, the contrast between the trajectories of the two is striking. The *Laocoön* reassembled in Rome in 1506 went on to become arguably the single most notable classical sculpture in the world. It comes close to anchoring the entire canon of Western art from its Greco-Roman inception, via Renaissance mediation, to its twentieth-century recapitulations through Warburg’s *Mnemosyne* and Clement Greenberg’s “Towards a Newer Laocoön”.² Along the way, it inspired the birth of neoclassical aesthetics and a reference point for modernist discourse. In contrast, the eighth-century Chinese variation of the Laocoön remains unknown outside China. Even among historians of Chinese art, it is known largely to a small circle of specialists in Buddhist art, though none of them has connected it to *Laocoön*. The sculptural relief of the Laocoön-like figure occupies no place in the Chinese art canon. Not a single Chinese art survey, in any language, features it. While this is largely the case, there is also a catch. The eighth-century relief sculpture here actually has a deep connection with the history of canon formation in China.



Figure 1. Anon, *Laocoön and His Sons*, ca. 50 CE, after a Greek original from ca. 300 BCE. Marble. Photo: Wilfredo Rafael Rodriguez Hernandez. The Vatican Museum, Rome.



Figure 2. Anon (China), *Mahoraga Holding a Serpent*, 8th century. Henan, China. Photo courtesy of Li Jingjie.



Figure 3. Xiudingsi tower, 8th century. Henan, China. External view. Courtesy of Li Jingjie.

3. Arts and Classics

To understand why the Chinese Laocoön failed to enter an art canon, we must first examine how the idea of an art canon or “classics” developed in China. In the centuries before the common era, the Chinese notion of “art” was rooted in an agricultural stratum. It largely referred to technical skills, akin to the ancient Greek notion of *techne*. As such, it was relegated to the same category as disciplines and practices such as medicine and fortune-telling. When the First Emperor of Qin orchestrated a massive campaign to burn books as a way of tightening the control of public opinions, the focus was primarily on philosophical treatises and histories with ideological positions. Manuals on technical matters—such as art—were spared.

It is one of the remarkable occurrences in Chinese or even world history that “art” in the sense of *techne* or practical knowledge was elevated to the exalted status of classical canon (*jingdian*). This shift in the meaning of “art” took place sometime around 200 BCE. As late as 230s BCE, art referred to the set of “six arts”, which included competencies in rites, music, archery, charioteering, literacy, and numeracy. By the 2nd century BCE, however, the “arts” shifted their senses to mean the Confucian canon of “Six Classics”: *The Classic of History (shu)*, *The Classic of Poetry (shi)*, *Classic of Rites (li)*, *Classic of Music (yue)*, *Book of Changes (yi)*, *The Annals of Spring and Autumn (chunqiu)*. These texts were attributed to the editorial hand of Confucius (ca. 551–ca. 479 BCE). In his own time, Confucius was not as highly regarded as he was centuries later. His school was but one of competing schools of thought, even though his and the Moists were the more eminent ones. The notorious bibliocaust under the First Emperor of Qin (259–210 BCE; r. 221–210 BCE) led to the burning of books of different thoughts and opinions. Under the Emperor Wu of Han (156–87 BCE), efforts were made to restore classical learning. The Confucian scholars saw their opportunity. They repackaged “Six Classics” as “Six Arts”. Scholarship, or the matter of learning (*xue*), was turned into “methods” or techniques (*shu*) relevant to state

governance. In doing so, they made their “arts” more applicable to statecraft than other competing schools. The strategy worked. Confucian classics were raised to the privileged canonical status. Court-appointed doctors of learning were established whose expertise consisted of mastering the “Five Classics”. To sustain the aura of the “Six Arts”, the *Classic of Music*, whose existence is questionable, was added to the canon. Thus, in the second century BCE, “Six Classics” became “arts”. What did this equation of “arts” and “classics” mean for the original “arts” (archery, charioteering, literacy, numeracy, etc.)?”

4. Classics and Sacraments

Once the Six Classics became Six Arts, it meant a double movement. Canonical books carried the name of arts. The concept of “arts” was thus upgraded from mere skill sets to classics. At the outset, it may suggest the valorization of texts over pictures. Books indeed now stood for “arts”. However, that is not the whole picture. The Han canonization mystified the genealogy of the canon formation. In pre-Han times, there was already a type of distinct object or sacrament, exemplified by the “River Chart”. Pre-Han sources refer to the chart as a kind of ritual paraphernalia possessed by the royal houses and deployed on ceremonial occasions (Legge 1970, vol. 3, p. 321). Its genesis takes place in the topography of a riverside. The “chart” emerges from the Yellow River, and a complimentary form of “writing” arises out of the Luo River (See Figure 4) (Shaughnessy 1996, pp. 200–1; Eugene Wang 2007b, pp. 199–200).



Figure 4. *Duan Inkstone with Mythical Tortoise Carrying Books*, Song dynasty. The National Palace Museum, Taipei, CC BY 4.0 @ www.npm.gov.tw.

Together, the [Yellow] River Chart and the Luo [River] Writing epitomize the ultimate form of sacrament. Their material forms still elude us. Early sources seem to hint at some form of stone tablets with cryptic markings, or suggestive graphic and abstract forms. In some accounts, these early “charts” are equated with patterns on the tortoise carapaces or birds’ footprints. One way or another, they are *patterns* from *nature*, found but not made. Only ancient sages could decipher their import. These then became the prototypes for both pictures and texts. More importantly, embodying heaven’s will and appearing on cue, these revealed sacrament-like artifacts contain cryptical messages and prophecies.

The process and mechanism of canonization thus become relatively clear. The process involved several moving parts. First, the canon has to be “primordial” in disposition. Then, it needs to possess the structural capacity of a scaffolding or grid to allow for subsequent piling up or building. Finally, it is endowed with authority.³

To this end, the canonization perpetuated by the Han Confucianists essentially followed this script. To accentuate the “primordial” character of the classical scriptures, the biblio-myth-mongers conjured up a primordial scenario of how scriptures came into being. Ancient scriptures, according to the early biblio-myth-mongers, were not so much written or made as they were *found*. In their *primordial* form, as mentioned above, they were proto-texts or proto-pictures (*tu*), i.e., charts, designs, blueprints, or patterns, somewhat above both texts and pictures; also, they were discovered in nature. Typically, they emerged from nature by way of *patterns* on the carapace of tortoises or the footprint of birds (Eugene Wang 2007b, pp. 199–200).

The structural disposition of primordial scriptures is often explained by way of textile terms (Eugene Wang 2007a). Classics amount to the *warp*, or the vertical weave; their exegetical derivatives—the secondary redacted commentary literature (*zhuan*) stemming from them—constitute the *weft* or the horizontal weave. The “weft-weave text” (*weishu*) takes cues from the primary classics and expands them. These typically involve ritual structures, phenomena concerning astronomy, calendars, weather, geography, mythical scenarios, and abnormal occurrences to be construed as omens and portents (Zhong 1995, pp. 83–89). A simple and terse line in the *Annals of the Spring and Autumn*—“In the spring of the 14th year, a primordial beast (*lin*) was captured during the westward hunting”—would open a floodgate for a torrential amount of “weft-weave texts” that elaborate on the scenario of how classics were found, not made.

Finally, the process of canonization is keyed to figures of authority. Primordial patterns emerged from nature. Their significance depends on ancient sages to recognize and decipher them. Confucius was thus deified from a historical figure—a man of learning—to a sage demi-god capable of receiving such ancient patterns.

The equation of classics and arts thus did not lead to the denigration of visual arts. While scriptures were conflated with “arts”, the primordial scenario of the genesis of ancient scripture only accentuated the graphic character of the classical canon. This notion of canon as primarily a matter of graphics became a dominant perception by the second century. “All the Six Arts”, observes Zheng Xuan (127–200 CE), a notable classicist, “were born out of the [primordial] charts (*tu*)” (Zheng 1997, vol. 2, p. 788).

5. Seven Treasures

The canonization of objects around the beginning of the common era has its historical replay in the seventh century. In 693, three years after she overthrew her late husband’s Tang dynasty (618–907), Wu Zetian (624–705) declared herself to be the Golden-Wheel Sagely Divine Emperor. She held the audience in the Divine Palace of Myriad Images. While the name of the palace literally means “Ten Thousand Images”, the only set of objects noted in the historical sources was the “Seven Treasures” (Ouyang 1975, chap. 76, p. 3482; Sima 1956, p. 6492). The female emperor invariably displayed the set each time she held the audience.

The “Seven Treasures” were derived from the sacraments frequently referenced in Buddhist sutras. The concept denotes two groups of images. In some cases, it evokes a cast of characters or constituents closely associated with the legendary Wheel-Turning King, the proverbial worldly monarch dedicated to propagating the Buddhist cause on earth. The cast consists of the Golden Wheel, the White Elephant, the Blue Horse, the Spirit Jewel, the Jade Woman, the Treasurer, and the General (Dharmagupta, T1:372b; See Figure 5).⁴



Figure 5. Facade of the Xiudingsi tower, 8th century. Henan, China. Historical photograph. Photo courtesy of Li Jingjie.

In a different context, the Seven Treasures refer to a host of precious objects—gold, silver, lapis lazuli, seashell, agate, pearl, and carnelian (Watson 1993, p. 170). By the seventh century, the two sevenfold sets were integrated into one coherent scenario. The Wheel-Turning King, attended by his Seven Treasures (e.g., the elephant, horse, etc.), goes about and pacifies the four directions. Once universal peace is restored, the world accordingly turns into a land of “gold, silver, lapis lazuli, crystal, cornelian, ruby, and emerald” (Narendrayaśas, T310:428–429).

Cued by textual sources, the “Seven Treasures” became a blueprint for monumental constructions. The most notable instance is the building of a “Seven-Treasure Tower”. In 677, ether-watchers reported to Empress Wu Zetian that some supernatural ether could be observed at the vineyard of the Guangzhai Ward of the capital city Chang’an. Wu authorized excavation, which led to the discovery of alleged “ten thousand” grains of Buddha relics. A temple was built on the site. Imperial orders were given to distribute the relics to local prefects and districts, forty-nine pieces per district. These were part of Wu’s campaign that led to the overthrow of the Tang and the establishment of the Wu Zhou dynasty in 690. Three years later, the Seven-Treasure Tower was built. The structure was probably destroyed in the late ninth century. The sculptural remains from the monument still exist, most notably, the Eleven-Headed Sound Observers, now scattered in various museums around the world (Yen 1986). The Xiudingsi Pagoda also bears the imprint of this monumental project. The motif of the “Seven Treasures”—i.e., the Golden Wheel, the White Elephant, the Blue Horse, the Spirit Jewel, the Jade Woman, the Treasurer, and the General—dominate the relief sculptures of each of its four sides (Sun 2015, p. 51; See Figure 5). A painted Tang banner from Dunhuang, now in the British Museum, also registers the Seven-Treasures vogue that swept medieval China in the seventh and eighth centuries (See Figure 6).⁵



Figure 6. Figure 6. Painted Tang banner from Dunhuang, 9th century. Ink and colors on silk. The British Museum. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Asset number 117001.

6. Treasure Records and Miracles: World's First Catalog of Sculptures

The Seven Treasures Tower stems from an omen culture that reached another height in the seventh century. If Ban Gu's "Treatise on arts and writing" epitomizes the first-century attempt at the canonization of art, the *Records of Three Treasures and Miracles of China*, or, more literally, *Records of Stimulus and Fulfillment of the Three Jewels Collected from [all places throughout] the Spiritual Realm* (Lippiello 2001, p. 177), by Daoxuan (596–667) amounts to the seventh-century effort in canonization. The text is arguably the oldest history and catalog of sculptures in the world.⁶ A catalog *raisonné* of sorts, it records the formation of fifty Buddhist statues—how they came about and worked their efficacy. While we may thus align it with the art historical genre of catalogs of our times, it is also notably distinct in its medieval disposition. Consisting of a tripartite structure, the catalog of fifty statues is preceded by an inventory of twenty stupa-towers and followed by a compendium of the notable agencies and stage managers, i.e., monastic communities. This last part in turn consists of a list of monasteries and a compilation of hagiographies of eminent monks known for their recitation of sutras and thaumaturgy.

What brings Daoxuan's *Records* closer to our modern sensibility is its explicit foregrounding of Buddha statues as art objects with their material and formal properties. A Buddhist statue, as we gather from the text, consists of an icon proper, a base, and a mandorla (T52:414a; 415b). The text also specifies, in some cases, the material medium of the statue: bronze (T52:419c), sandalwood (T52:418c), cliffside excavation (T52:417c), etc.

Occasionally, the catalog even identifies the sculptors, such as Dai Kui (ca. 331–396) and Dai Yong (ca. 377–441) (T52:416c; 421a). It also specifies the production methods, such as the sculptural production of a statue based on a drawing of a statue elsewhere (T52:414c). However, these properties matter less than the core dynamic governing the exalted list of fifty storied images.

The *Records* appears to be exacting in specifying, here and there, the dimensions of a statue—e.g., the colossal Buddha statue at the Fanyun Monastery is said to be “*fifty-nine feet (chi)*” in height. It also traces the statue’s genesis and genealogy to mystic or fantastic realms. Moreover, statues are often partially endowed with some degree of sentience. They are capable of sweating (T52:419a), at times showing reluctance to comply with human demands or losing their heads of their own accord as ways of signaling an ominous future event.

The primary importance of any statue, as Daoxuan has it, is its symbolic function as a placeholder. Statues matter not because they really *stand for* the Buddha. Rather, they are a makeshift semblance of the “real body” of the Buddha. Buddhism is considered a “teaching by way of images” (*xiangjiao*), which has often been misleadingly rendered as a “religion of images”. In fact, as more recent scholarship points out, the concept is more of “semblance teachings” or “phenomenal teachings” (Greene 2018, pp. 455–84).

Images or art objects are thus integral to such teachings. It is made abundantly clear by the eminent monk Xuan Zang (602–664) in his distinct presentation of the matter to the imperial throne, upon his return from his eighteen-year travel in India and Central Asia. The purpose of Xuanzang’s journey to India is now commonly remembered as a quest for Buddhist classics (*jing*). In fact, Xuanzang insists that the goal of his quest is to acquire a whole package consisting of *both* “sutras and images (*jingxiang*)” (Huili, T50:248a), a concept that Daoxuan reiterates (Daoxuan, T52:413c). Xuanzang’s acquisition thus consists of 657 sutras, 7 Buddha statues, 150 grains of Buddha’s “bodily relics” (*rousheli*), and a casket of “bone relics” (*gusheli*) (Xuanzang, T52:818a). Xuanzang explains that he was seeking Buddha’s “spirit trace” (*lingji*) in India and that Buddha’s great teachings were comparable to ancient Chinese classics. They take the form of primordial sages’ graphs, ancient diagrams, and cryptic patterns. Once acquired, they deserve to be housed in treasure towers and edifices (T52:818a). The scenario here recalls the first-century script: the holy grail is the primordial patterns to be found in nature; actual objects are all but materialization of the ancient *pattern* or proto-picture. Daoxuan picks up where Xuanzang left off. The *Records* contains a number of instances when, for example, a statue is said to have been dug up from underground, two *chi* and one *cun* in height, accompanied by an inscription on its base that carries the date of 30CE (418b). More pointedly, the accounts of some of the acquisitions apparently follow the ancient script—from the foundation of a tower, a “divine tortoise is found, its sweet dew attracting a swarm of black bees; the tortoise appears to carry some talismanic graphs” (T52:412a).

The seventh century nevertheless adds another dimension to the time-honored tradition of canonization. A new ontology of images emerges from both Xuanzang’s presentation and Daoxuan’s catalog. The Indic culture adds a ludic dimension—a play on illusive existence—to the traditional Chinese omenology of the heavenly will manifesting itself in natural patterns. Illusive phantasmagoria is often brought into play with material palpability. The Buddhist relics epitomize this interplay between the optical and material presences. Relics are said to be primarily optically illusive, and hard to pin down; they can also be paradoxically materially present, capable of withstanding repeated hammering. These two properties do not add up. Yet it is precisely this tension that makes relics both elusive and present as objects of attention. It is for this reason that Daoxuan’s catalog opens with an inventory of twenty *relic* towers. Its thrust is not architecture; rather, the attention

to relic towers sets up a topography of discovery—in this, the scenario still follows the ancient script of finding hidden patterns. Meanwhile, the tower-centered topography puts into play the relic-emanated optical show. The beholder sees successive vignettes on the surface of stones or other mediums uncovered from the underground (T52:404b). The optical-cum-material dynamic derived from the Buddhist relics thus extends, in Daoxuan's catalog, from relic towers to statues. Even though the statues have more material presence, their ontology is still an extension of the relic lore: they are all but "semblances" (*xiang*) with a tenuous relationship with the absent Buddha. Hence their occasional elusive displays of limited sentience: sweating, losing heads of their own accord, etc.

If Daoxuan's catalog amounts to the seventh-century way of canonization, the question then comes down to what gets canonized after all. Particular artworks hardly matter. What matters is the processes of how statues become what they are and how they work their wonders. It is the image lore that confers canonical status on objects. The lore weighs more rather than the objects. Again, the relic provides the paradigm. As an object of veneration, it is ontologically and optically illusive, oscillating between a mere illusive phantasmagoria and a physical object; its material instantiation is, therefore, all but a secondary and indexical placeholder. The statues are more or less an extension of this logic.

7. The Canonical Sandalwood Image

We are hard-pressed to find "canonical" statues surviving to this day. None of the fifty statues inventoried in Daoxuan's catalog has survived. The only exception is the set of later statues that carries the pedigree of the sandalwood image obtained from India. Early Buddhist sources speak of Sakyamuni, bothered by his followers' lackadaisical effort, decides to take a leave of absence from the human world. He ascends to the Tushita Heaven to preach the Dharma to his deceased mother Maya. Troubled by his absence and yearning for his presence, local kings, Udayana and Prasenajit, respectively, commission talented artisans to create Buddha's likeness. The statue commissioned by Udayana was made of sandalwood from Oxhead Hill (Zhu, T2:705b-706a)

When Sakyamuni descends from heaven to the human world, the golden statue created in his likeness pays homage to him. Kneeling in front of the statue, the Buddha addresses it and entrusts his followers to it in anticipation of his future absence from earth (Sengyou, T50:66c).

Chinese visitors to India, ranging from Faxian (337–422) to Xuanzang (602–664), report their encounter with sandalwood images aligned with this tradition (Faxian, T51:858a; Huili, T50:234c).

Daoxuan's catalog picks up where the early sources leave off as an Indian story. His *Records* relates that the Chinese Emperor Wu (464–549) of Liang had a dream, in 502, of the proverbial sandalwood statue created by King Udayana. He sent an envoy to India to obtain one. The Chinese emissary finally came back in 511 with a statue. It had survived up to Daoxuan's time (T52:419b). Subsequently, two lines of development have consolidated this genealogy of the sandalwood image. The Japanese monk Chōnen (938–1016) acquired a standing sandalwood Buddha and brought it back to Japan in 986 (Henderson and Hurvitz 1956, pp. 5–55). Meanwhile, a steady pedigree continued in China uninterrupted. Successive remaking projects sponsored by imperial rulers ensure its continuation. Each major imperially sponsored replica of the sandalwood image associated with Udayana (See Figure 7) is accompanied by a new recapitulation of the history of the image.

The notable ones include the account by the Yuan court historian Cheng Jufu (1249–1318) upon the construction of a hall that housed the sandalwood image in 1316

and the records attending to the creation of sandalwood images in 1666 under the Kangxi Emperor (1654–1722) (Nianchang, T49:730; Liu and Gao 1987, pp. 142–43).

What is remarkable about the fourteenth-century account is its astonishing precision and care with which the Chinese phase of the pedigree is chronicled. According to Cheng, Buddha prophesied that “a millennium after my extinction, thou [the sandalwood statue] shall reach China”. The prophecy put in the mouth of the Buddha then spelled out a precise chronology of the sandalwood image’s itinerary: “68 years in Kucha, 14 years in Liangzhou, 17 years in Chang’an, 173 years in Jiangnan”, and so on, until the pedigree reached 1316, “a total 2307 years” of development (T49:730b). Recapitulations by subsequent dynasties kept piling up all the way to the twentieth century. The doubled-down imperial patronage and sanctification hitched the fate of the image to the eventual decline of the imperial power and its gradual irrelevance to the art world.



Figure 7. *Standing Buddha in Abhayavara Mudra, Udayana Type*, Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop, Photo © President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1943.53.115.

8. Canonical Difficulty: Instability of Objecthood

The serpent-wrapped Laocoön-like figure is an integral part of this larger sculptural relief anchored by the “Seven Treasures” (See Figure 5). Needless to say, the focus of the sculptural relief composition is on the Seven Treasures. The Laocoön-like figure is all but subservient to the focal center (See Figure 2). Moreover, the characterization of the brickwork here as “sculpture” can be misleading; it actually requires some readjustment of the perceptual habits we bring to bear on the work. Much as the material medium signals monumental solidity expected of an architectural-sculptural construct, its tenet actually suggests two qualities at odds with the sturdy medium: optical instability and textile medium.

The structure centered on the “Seven Treasures” stems from an omen-obsessed culture preoccupied with sightings of miracles and portents. The building of the Seven-Treasure Tower itself was occasioned by the discovery of Buddha’s relics. The relic cult in medieval China is premised on the paradoxical mixture of ontological dematerialization and materi-

alization. Relics appear as optical wonders; they are often acquired through acts of mental exercises. Meanwhile, they are said to possess solidity and allegedly withstand repeated hammering (Wang 2005, p. 84). As omens, the Seven Treasures themselves were intended as optical wonders. The Golden Wheel, the primary object of the set, for instance, is said to appear “suddenly” as an optical splendor from the east (Xuanzang, T29 no. 1559: 12.64b).

The textile as the conceptual model here for architectural-sculptural construction is just as significant. For one thing, Buddhist texts often envision a magic space to project and witness optical wonders:

The Buddha with his supernatural powers then caused all the jeweled parasols to come together and form one single parasol that spread over the entire thousand-millionfold world. All the vast features of that world were visible there in its midst

(Watson 1997, p. 20).

Moreover, devotional images were often installed on floats, wheeled carts, and palanquins, as part of the image procession for ceremonial occasions (Lai 1999, p. 65). These transported images were enclosed in curtains or sheltered in tents. The setup led to the architectural modeling of ritual spaces as brick-and-mortar simulation of a structure whose original medium was textile. The Xiudingsi Tower was conceived in this manner. Its surface is a crisscross of ropes and hangings. These two sets of properties—the optical and the textile—further suggest a paradox. While the brick structure promises solidity, the tenet is ephemeral and even whimsical.

All of the above mitigates and erodes the idea of the canonization of art. Canonization seeks to solidify a set of objects as the paramount examples of art. The Chinese practice seems to contradict it even when a solid medium is involved. The case of the Seven Treasures sheds light on the matter. While the set seems to confer a canonical status to a set of objects, the “canon” here encompasses not so much the specific artworks as a *taxonomy* of materiality (e.g., the Golden Wheel, etc.). Moreover, materiality serves not so much to constitute the physical medium of the art as it is a cue for imaginary perceptual or optical experiences. So even though the serpent-wrapped figure may recall Laocoön, it is part and parcel of a set of cues for transient manifestations cast onto a structure whose deep medium is in fact a tent or “jeweled parasol” fitting for the presentation of images in the milieu of image procession.

9. The Japanese Laocoön

The Laocoön-like figure, as mentioned earlier, is part of the architectural-sculptural tradition epitomized by the Tower of the Seven Treasures built under Wu Zetian. The tower in turn belonged to a larger monumental complex consisting of the Bright Hall (completed in 688) and the Celestial Hall, which held a 100-foot-tall colossal Buddha statue. A devastating fire burned down the Bright Hall in early 695. In a culture sensitive to natural disasters, the fire could easily be seen as a sign of heaven manifesting its disapproval of the son of heaven’s earthly rule. Wu’s court officials tried to put a positive Buddhist spin on the catastrophe in light of the narrative situation described in the *Sūtra of Maitreya’s Attainment of Buddhahood*. Maitreya, the Buddha-to-be, born into the land ruled by the Wheel-Turning King Sankha, witnesses the disintegration of the Seven-Treasure Tower. Seeing the inconstancy of the human world, he enters the Buddhist order and attains enlightenment (Kumārajīva, T14:428-434).

In some twisted ways, the story of the canonization of Buddhist monuments contains its own dissolution. The sutra frontispiece deposited in the bricks of the tenth-century Leifeng Pagoda envisions and prophesies its future ruinous state, causing even the Buddha

to shed tears (Wang 2003). By its own account, the construction lore of the Seven-Treasure Tower in the capital spells out its own demise. The guarding of the treasures is said to be slack; Brahmins destroy the shares given to them. The real-life Seven-Treasure Tower met the same destiny. The sculptural pieces, once part of the edifice, were eventually dispersed in Japan, Europe, and the United States. One sculptural piece—an Eleven-Headed Guanyin—from the edifice entered the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in 1906 (See Figure 8).



Figure 8. *Eleven-headed Guanyin, Bodhisattva of Compassion, 7th century.* 117.7 × 27.9 cm. Carved limestone. Photograph © 2025 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

It was acquired in Japan by Okakura Kakuzō (1862–1913), the curator of Asian art at MFA, for 1600 yen, or roughly \$800 US dollars, which would purchase one quality horse and carriage.

Japanese scholars played pivotal roles in shaping or reshaping the canon of East Asian art at the turn of the twentieth century. The notables include Okakura Kakuzō (1862–1913), art historian and curator of Asian art at the Museum of Fine Art, Boston; Yamanaka Sadajirō (1866–1936), a well-educated dealer from Osaka who migrated to the US in 1894; Itō Chūta (1867–1954), an eminent architect and architectural historian, and Ono Genmyo (1883–1939). They all lived in the Meiji era (1868–1912) when Japan opened up to the West and accelerated its modernization by way of Westernization. Art, hitherto institutionalized in Buddhist temples, Imperial collections, aristocratic households, and elsewhere, began to gain a foothold in newly created public museums and educational institutions fashioned after European models. Greco-Roman classicism became the new gold standard. Even artists trained in traditional mediums and idioms also vibrated to the new trend. The drawing based on Laocoön, contained in *Kyōsai's Treatise on Painting* (1887) by Kawanabe Kyōsai (1831–1889), signals the new orientation (See Figure 9).

It was, indeed, not pure aestheticism. The classical nude body here became the site of empirical observation and anatomic learning along the lines of medical science. Western modernity meant the total package of art and science in one. But the body began to loom large. In light of this, it is easy to understand Itō Chūta's odd sketch produced between 1902–1903 during his field trip to China (See Figure 10).

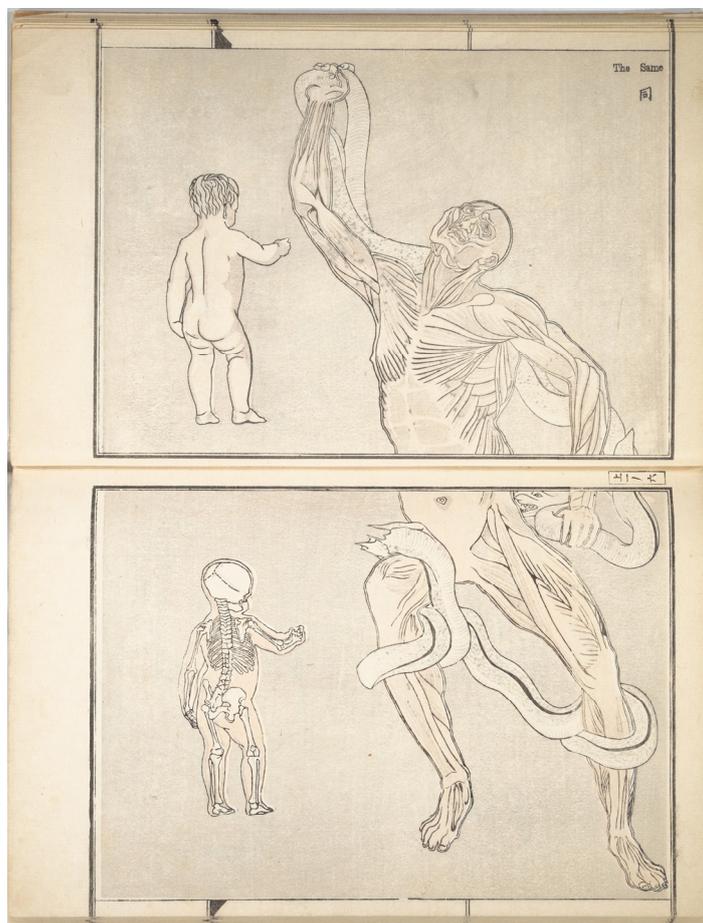


Figure 9. Kawanabe Kyōsai (1831–1889), *Laocoön and His Son*, in *Kyōsai's Treatise on Painting* (Kyōsai gadan) 暁斎画談, 1887. Ink and color on paper. 25.3 × 17.5 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Figure 10. Itō Chūta, *End of the Trip to China*, 1902–1903. In Itō Chūta *_Shinkoku_ Kankōkai, Ito Chuta Kenbunyacho Shinkoku* (Itō 1990).

Itō makes a double reference. He casts himself both as a Buddhist bodhisattva and a classical female nude. Playful as it is, the sketch is suggestive on many levels. The

figure lords over the picture map of East Asia with a significant overtone both in view of artistic genres (the primacy of figural art over the landscape) and geopolitics (the rising Japan over the weakened continental Qing China). The towering figure turns around to cast a meaningful look at the rising sun and Mt. Fuji on the horizon (Japan). Yet its foothold is in continental Asia. Japan (the rising sun) is the future, yet it harks back to two kinds of past. Geographically, the umbilical cord is traced back to Japan's own classical past located in continental Asia (China and India); aesthetically and formally, it looks to Greco-Roman classicism as its model of emulation.⁷ It is a forceful yoking of the East and West. Nonetheless, it betrays a double bind. The rift and tension soon showed. Aligning with the Greco-Roman classicism, Japan sought to rise above Asia. With its ascending nationalistic imperialism, however, Japan also wanted to counter the overbearing Western imperial power by holding its own court. *Asian* classicism, epitomized by Buddhist art in medieval China, was the solution (Tanaka 1993, p. 13). Given the late nineteenth-century understanding of Buddhist art being bandied about, it was a good strategic move to exalt Buddhist art. The solution patched things up well. For scholars like Ernest Fenollosa (1853–1908) and Alfred Foucher (1865–1952), East Asian Buddhist art had its origin in ancient Greece.⁸ Opinion started to change in the beginning of the twentieth century. With the stunning defeat of the Qing navy in 1895 and the mighty Russia in 1905, Japan's self-confidence and imperialistic nationalism grew considerably. It spilled into cultural spheres. Okakura Kakuzō, who served as Fenollosa's assistant back in Japan, soon took the harder line, vigorously refuting the view of East Asian Buddhist art as derived from Greek classicism. He regards the two traditions as arriving at the shared quality of the classical calm:

Buddhist art now assumes the aspect of calm which always rises out of the blending of the spirit with matter, in a repose where neither attempts to overwhelm the other, and thus becomes akin to the classic idea of the Greeks, whose pantheism led them to a similar expression.

(Okakura 1904, p. 112)

Okakura served first as advisor and then curator of Asian art curator at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in the 1910s until his death in 1913. During his curatorial tenure, he practiced what he preached. The eleven-headed Guanyin statue from the Seven-Treasure Tower he acquired in 1906 is a testimonial to his vision of the canon of Asian art (See Figure 8). Sculptures now began to acquire canonic weight.

Acquisitions like this also set in motion the formation of the canon of Asian art. It occurred amidst the surging wave of newly created museum collections in the second half of the nineteenth century in the West and Asia. International events, such as the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, further fueled the collecting activities. For curators like Okakura, East Asian *art* faced challenges on the world stage. To the Western audience, objects from East Asia, typically ceramics and lacquer, were seen as largely decorative works or manufactured crafts not on par with the monumental European classical works. Western audiences struggled to understand why East Asian art indulged in the world of birds and flowers and landscape instead of focusing on the human body glorified and aestheticized in the Western canon. As the period habit would have it, art expresses the character of a nation. Japanese art, and by extension, East Asian art, so it was observed, exhibits traits of "toy-like prettiness" and "gaiety of children". It is incapable of "heroic effort and colossal undertakings" (Binyon 1908, pp. 627–29), which, by implication, one would find in European classical statues such as Laocoön. Okakura's 1906 acquisition of the sculpture from the Seven-Treasure Tower apparently pushed back against such views. Asian art from this point on was no longer just ceramics. It is anchored by monumental Buddhist art in the form of stone sculptures.

10. Sculpture vs. Calligraphy

The new impulse initiated by Okakura and others at the beginning of the twentieth century reached its logical conclusion in 1935. The Royal Academy of Arts at Burlington House, London, held an international exhibition of Chinese art from 28 November 1935 to 7 March 1936. Sir Percival David (1892–1939), an eminent collector of Chinese art, and Laurence Binyon (1869–1943), a keeper at the British Museum, and other London-based elites, initiated the exhibition. 240 lenders throughout the world contributed to the show, chief among them, the Chinese government,⁹ and dealers such as Yamanaka Sadajiro (1866–1936) and C. T. Loo (1880–1957). The show was a huge success, drawing 401,768 visitors.¹⁰ See (Gray 1986, p. 31). It came to define what is later known as the “blockbuster show” (Steuber 2006, pp. 528–36).

The Chinese government’s close collaboration was motivated in part by its desire to project a new China through archaeologically inflected art. Unlike previous China-themed exhibitions, the Burlington House show presented a different veneer of “Chinese art”. Instead of the curios and ceramics that used to dominate such shows, the art now on display is often monumental, bolstered by unearthed objects from new archeological discoveries. A succession of exciting excavations in China in the 1920s and 1930s had caught the world’s attention: J. Gunnar Anderson’s (1874–1960) discovery of specimens of *Homo erectus* known as the Peking Man at Zhoukoudian, near Peking, in 1921; the unearthing of exquisite ancient bronze vessels from Xinzheng, Henan, in 1923; and the excavation of Anyang, the last Shang (ca. 1600–1046 BCE) capital, by the Institute of History and Philology of Academia Sinica from 1928 onward (Wang 2001, p. 127). The magnitude and range of objects from these discoveries convey an entirely different picture of China than Ming-Qing ceramic curios. Instead, emerging from the show is an ancient civilization for which the unearthed objects appeared as the tip of the iceberg.

The question of canon was again put on the block. In spite of the overwhelming success of the exhibition, there were a few notable voices expressing some reservations (Best 2023, p. 298). Chief among them were Clive Bell (1881–1964) and Kenneth Clark (1903–1983). Both had canonical European artists in mind as yardsticks to look for their equivalences in Chinese art. Hence the letdown. Bell asked: “Where is the Chinese Rembrandt?” (Bell 1936, pp. 47–49).

Likewise, Clark opined that “If we could see one of Rembrandt’s pen-and-ink drawings of a landscape . . . among the Chinese pictures at Burlington House, . . . we should get a sudden thrill of excitement which we can hardly feel anywhere else in the Exhibition” (Clark 1936, p. 152). Incidentally, Rembrandt is also one of Kenneth Clark’s canons of “Five Revolutionary Painters” (Goya, Breughel, Caravaggio, Van Gogh, and Rembrandt) (Wyver 2014, pp. 123–31, 126, and 129).

However, some pieces stood out as they were seen as measuring up to the European classical canon. Most notable among them is the headless Bodhisattva marble statue (See Figure 11). Even Bell succumbed to its beauty. Calling it “the Rockefeller Venus”, Bell allowed that

It is essentially Graeco-Indian, and reminds us in its movement and even more in its modelling of Venuses and Victories we have known. The back view of this beautiful figure is . . . the most ravishing thing in the house.

(Bell 1936, p. 48)

The London press ranked it as “one of the greatest pieces of sculpture of all countries and all time” (*The Times* 1935). The rationale is clear, as voiced by Sir Percival David:

To one great example of Chinese statuary, perhaps the greatest in the world, I must, however, pay humble tribute. . . . This grand conception of the Chinese

sculptor, full of grace and movement, owes much to the artistic heritage left by Greece and India to the Far East. It is from Greece that it derives the clinging folds of its drapery; it is India which has inspired the swaying poise of the body and its sensuous modelling. But it is the genius of China which has breathed into the figure its vitalizing spirit.

(David 1935, p. 246)



Figure 11. *Bodhisattva*, 8th century. Marble sculpture. 180.34 cm. Rockefeller Collection. Object #_ NT 79.29.0318. Photography by John Bigelow Taylor, Digital image © Asia Society. Accession number: NT 79.29.318.

Abby Aldrich Rockefeller (1874–1948) lent the piece to the exhibition. While her husband was passionate about Chinese ceramics, Mrs. Rockefeller was drawn to large-scale Chinese sculptures. The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Garden in Seal Harbor, Maine, created in 1928, teems with Asian sculptures, particularly funerary statues. Abby acquired the statue from Yamanaka, who, together with C.T. Loo were key players in the Asian art market mainly because of their savviness, their sensitivity to the archeological turn, and nearly unrivaled facility in acquiring unearthed objects and ways of shipping them abroad. Both shared the same notion of what canonical Chinese art ought to be: monumental stone sculptures, figural art, ancient bronze vessels, and so on. Both were also dealer-turned-art historians. They not only dealt with art but also wrote their versions of histories of Chinese art. In both cases, their writings went some way toward canonizing Chinese art, prioritizing early and medieval periods and monumental mediums (Yamanaka & Company 1902).¹¹ They also were aware of the generic model for their art historical writing. *A Brief History of the Glyptic Art and Architecture* produced by Yamanaka & Company, for instance, contains a “biography of eminent architects and sculptors”, which is apparently modeled after Giorgio Vasari’s (1511–1574) *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (Eisen 2016, p. 36). The artworks they lent to the exhibition were ostensible. Towering over other exhibits was the Amitabha Buddha, nineteen feet tall and weighing over three (See Figure 12) (Gray 1986, p. 31) or, by another account, twenty tons (Art News 1935, p. 12).



Figure 12. *Marble figure of the Buddha Amitabha*, year 585CE. Marble sculpture. 5.78 m. The British Museum. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Asset number 34168001.

Museum curators took note. On a separate occasion, Steward Culin, a Brooklyn Museum curator, was so impressed by the stone sculptures from C. T. Loo on display, immediately urged the museum trustees to “acquire large monumental objects for our Oriental department, concentrating upon a small number and securing only things of high importance and preferably those which are not perishable (Yiyou Wang 2007, p. 204).

A misconception on the London side led to the augmentation of the two dealers’ role in re-canonizing Chinese art in the 1935 exhibition. The growing appreciation of Buddhist sculptures, fostered in part by Yamanaka and C.T. Loo, based on the alignment with the classical Greek model, prompted the British Organizing Committee to request Buddhist sculptures from the Chinese side. The request greatly perplexed the Chinese government. The Chinese had, for quite some time, slighted Buddhist sculptures on the ground that they were made by craftsmen, hence not in the league of calligraphy and painting that comprised the high art in the Chinese canon. The British had to turn to Yamanaka and C. T. Loo for assistance (Fan 2011, p. 143). Hence, the debut of Buddhist sculptures in the Burlington House exhibition.

The success of the sculptural takeover was a mixed blessing in the re-canonization of Chinese art on the international stage. Buddhist sculptures were admitted into the canon, on the basis of their alignment with classical Greece, thereby correcting the Western misconception of the canon of Chinese art tethered to curios and ceramics. However, the 1935 re-canonization was itself fraught with problems. Some sensitive Chinese critics sensed where things may have gone wrong. The changing attitude of Lin Yutang (1895–1976), an eminent cosmopolitan man of letters, exemplified the ambivalence felt by the Chinese

intellectuals toward the 1935 exhibition. Lin's education at Harvard and Leipzig made him a cosmopolitan man of letters. In the early 1930s, he considered Song porcelain statues, such as the Guanyin statue in the collection of George Eumorphopoulos, anchoring "Oriental civilization" in the same way Greek art stood for Western civilization (Fan 2012, p. 9). His view soon shifted. His endorsement of the 1935 exhibition notwithstanding, Lin was emphatic in his writing about the primacy of calligraphy as the foundation of Chinese art. Lin saw Western art invested in sensuality and passion. In comparison, Chinese art to him was more chastened. Western art "drew inspiration from the beauty of women" while Chinese art was inspired by mountains and streams. Hence, the organic "rhythmic and structural form" of Chinese calligraphy was the basic principle of Chinese art (Lin 1935, pp. 495–507). Lin was not alone. There was a surge of interest in exalting Chinese calligraphy during and shortly after the 1935 exhibition (Fan 2011, p. 149). It seems to be a tacit response to the success of Buddhist sculptures lionized in the exhibition.

11. The Seven-Treasure Tower Statue and Herbert Read's Sculptural Canon

It is remarkable that the Seven-Treasure Tower continues to anchor the story of canon formation around 1935 involving Chinese art and English critics. The Bodhisattva statue, "hips swaying and swathed in the thinnest cloth" (Reif 1994, p. A29), was touted by Clive Bell as the "Rockefeller Venus" and a "masterpiece *tout court*". It is decidedly stylistically akin to the Bodhisattva figures, now in the Tokyo National Museum, from the Seven-Treasure Tower. Just as remarkable is that a Bodhisattva statue from the Seven-Treasure Tower *was* admitted into the canonical pantheon established by Herbert Read (1893–1968) in his foundational *The Art of Sculpture* (1956). In the spirit of Matthew Arnold's (1822–1888) selection of eleven lines out of world poetry as exemplifying its canonic essence, Read selected a set of seven sculptures—starting from the head of an Egyptian prince, and ending with Henry Moore's reclining figure. The grand narrative underpinning his selection is an evolution of aesthetic values: from beauty to truth, from idealism to realism, and from serenity to vitality. Lessing's *Laocoön* again becomes a linchpin here (Lessing 1984). Read stands Lessing's opposition between sculpture and dramatic poetry on its head. To Lessing, the sculpture is about the beauty of harmony and collected calm; poetry is about expression and ventilation. *Laocoön*, in Lessing's view, sacrifices beauty to expression. Read, however, would rather not have expression sacrificed to beauty. Vitality, the endpoint of his aesthetic evolution, powers expression. Thus, for him, Henry Moore's figures embody that vitality.

This is where the Seven-Treasure Tower figure comes in handy for Read's scheme. Read's preference for vitality led him to look for rhythmic movement. This he found in sculptures across the world. The statue from the Seven-Treasure Tower is thus featured in his *Art of Sculpture*. He touted the "linear motif" and "the soft rhythms . . . working around a palpable mass", and admired "the lines of the drapery [having] a powerful rhythmic function . . . and the outward thrust of the body beneath the drapery" in formal alignment with Henry Moore (Read 1961, p. 96). The sequence of the 224 illustrations that fill his book ends with a suggested pair: a Chinese rock sculpture and a detail of Henry Moore's reclining figure (Read 1961, pl. 224a and pl. 224b). Linear rhythms are their shared property and quality and the closure of his aesthetic evolution over time.

The Laocoön-like figure on the Xiudingsi tower would, in fact, fit into Read's scheme even better (See Figure 2). Here expression is not sacrificed to beauty—beauty in the sense of Lessing's calm and control of passion. Linear rhythms here trump the mass and volume. Had the relief sculpture entered their purview, Lin Yutang and Chinese critics in the 1930s would have touted this medium as a carrier of linear rhythm instead of opposing

calligraphy to sculpture. All they needed to do was to reconceptualize sculpture as a rhythmic medium in the way Read saw it.

But neither Lin nor Read saw it. The matter is not circumstantial contingency. The reason underlying the Xiudingsi figure's failure to be canonized goes deeper. The odds were stacked against it in view of the system of art in medieval China. The Chinese art system is preoccupied with the classification and ranking of artists rather than artworks. From the sixth century on, artists were ranked into different classes. Xie He (fl. 6th c.), for instance, grouped painters into six classes (Acker 1954–1974, pp. 1–32). Zhang Huaiguan (fl. ca. 724–760) classified calligraphers into three grades, i.e., the inspired (*shen*), the refined (*miao*), and the competent (*neng*) (Zhang 1979, pp. 171–203). The criteria on which the artists were graded and ranked stem from the way art criticism works in traditional China. The characterization of formal qualities is at times transposed to the domain of characterology to suggest personality traits. Formal characters thus become profiles of persona. Accordingly, art criticism focuses on artists as personas or profiles. Artworks—with the exception of rare cases such as the *Preface to the Orchid Pavilion*—are rarely singled out for discussion (Escande 2014, p. 161).

There is more. Under the Tang, when the canonization of artworks began in earnest, none of the sculptural works was ever canonized. Just as striking are other seemingly inexplicable oddities. Wu Daozi was considered by Tang critics as the unparalleled painter of the time. Yet none of his works has survived. Art historians have searched for Wu's works left and right. "If there were just one of his paintings left", Werner Speiser noted, "the history of Far Eastern art would look different" (Speiser 1959, p. 153). Yet, not a single work by him has survived. The stylistic qualities associated with Wu are precisely the linear rhythms. Max Loehr (1903–1988) regards *The Spirit of Hengyue*, an ink rubbing traditionally attributed to Wu Daozi, as a "design" that preserves Wu Daozi's stylistic traits. He consequently marvels at the wind-swept scarves and lineworks, while being underwhelmed by the treatment of the muscular bodies (Loehr 1980, pp. 44–45). Loehr's use of the ink rubbing to anchor his discussion of Wu Daozi's style has commanded some following (Wu 2022, p. 163). Compared with *The Spirit of Hengyue*, the relief sculpture of the serpent-wrestling figure on the Xiudingsi (See Figure 2) can be considered a more credible bearer of Wu Daozi's style and design, as it is close in dates to Wu's time. The monastery is also located in the region where Wu Daozi was active. However, the point here is not that we have discovered an artwork closer to an "authentic" Wu Daozi. Rather, if we change the *name* of the artist for the formal qualities associated with the name, we would have made the canonical figure more meaningful.

Our story of the Chinese Laocoön on the Xiudingsi tower thus imparts a range of morals. Canons of art were initially not about assembling "touchstones", in the manner of Read's modernist scheme. Rather, it was the establishment of a conceptual architecture encompassing skill sets and disciplinary boundaries, sanctioned by imperial and other kinds of authorities. In such canons, the objecthood of artworks was in flux. The canon as we know it did not take shape until modern times when cultural and intellectual elites like Herbert Read came along with their "touchstones". Against this backdrop, it becomes apparent that the Xiudingsi sculpture has yet to wait for our time to become the Chinese Laocoön (See Figure 2).

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Abbreviations

T = *Taishō shinshū Daizōkyō*. Edited by Takakusu Junjirō and Watanabe Kaigyoku. Tōkyō: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–1934.

Notes

- ¹ For recent works on canon, which also contain extensive bibliographic references, see (Levitt and Rutherford 2019, pp. 1–24; Bertens 2022, pp. 240–62).
- ² On the history of the Vatican Laocoön and its reception, see esp. (Settis 1999; Brilliant 2000; Didi-Huberman 2001, pp. 621–45; Greenberg 1940, pp. 296–310).
- ³ My tripartite formulation is built on a similar proposition by Zhong Zhaopeng, see (Zhong 1995, p. 4).
- ⁴ See Dharmagupta (?–619) trans. *Qishiyin benjing* [Sutra on the Causes and Beginning of the World] (Dharmagupta, T1:372b) in *Taishō shinshū Daizōkyō*. Hereafter T. Other sutras give variants of the Seven Treasures. Dharmalokā’s (active 290–306) version consists of the Golden Wheel, the elephant, the horse, the jewel, the jade woman, the Buddhist layman, and the royal guardian. See (Dharmalokā, T1:5b).
- ⁵ Stein Collection, The British Museum, 1919,0101,0.99.
- ⁶ Earlier precedents include the inventory of twenty-six Buddhist images by Sengyou (445–518), one of the earlier catalogers of the Chinese Tripiṭaka. See (Sengyou, T55:92c). However, unlike Daoxuan’s substantial catalog *raisonne*, Sengyou merely lists the images without giving biographies of objects.
- ⁷ A geo-political reading of the sketch has been offered. See (Yu 2015, pp. 884–918).
- ⁸ For a more recent critique, see (Conrad 2020, pp. 19–53).
- ⁹ The Chinese government in fact made the initial curatorial selection and a pre-show in Shanghai with an accompanying catalog. The London committee built on that by “filling the gap” through requests for loans from Europe. See (Gray 1986, p. 31).
- ¹⁰ An alternative estimate of the public visits is 422, 143.
- ¹¹ C. T. Loo wrote extensively on Chinese art through his catalog essays, see, for example, (Loo 1917). For a complete list of publications by C. T. Loo, see (Lenain 2013). See also (Yiyu Wang 2007).

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