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Shaping The Lotus Sutra: Buddhist Visual Culture In Medieval China



Synopsis

The Lotus Sutra has been the most widely read and most revered Buddhist scripture in East Asia since its translation in the third century. The miracles and parables in the "king of sutras" inspired a variety of images in China, in particular the sweeping compositions known as transformation tableaux that developed between the seventh and ninth centuries. Surviving examples in murals painted on cave walls or carved in relief on Buddhist monuments depict celestial journeys, bodily metamorphoses, cycles of rebirth, and the achievement of nirvana. Yet the cosmos revealed in these tableaux is strikingly different from that found in the text of the sutra. Shaping the Lotus Sutra explores this visual world. Challenging long-held assumptions about Buddhist art, Eugene Wang treats it as a window to an animated and spirited world. Rather than focus on individual murals as isolated compositions, Wang views the entire body of pictures adorning a cave shrine or a pagoda as a visual mapping of an imaginary topography that encompasses different temporal and spatial domains. He demonstrates that the text of the Lotus Sutra does not fully explain the pictures and that a picture, or a series of them, constitutes its own "text." In exploring how religious pictures subliminate cultural aspirations, he shows that they can serve both political and religious agendas and that different social forces can co-exist within the same visual program. These pictures inspired meditative journeys through sophisticated formal devices such as mirroring, mapping, and spatial programming - analytical categories newly identified by Wang. The book examines murals in cave shrines at Binglingsi and Dunhuang in northwestern China and relief sculptures in the grottoes of Yungang in Shanxi, on stelae from Sichuan, and on the Dragon-and-Tiger pagoda in Shandong, among other sites. By tracing formal impulses in medieval Chinese picture-making, such as topographic mapping and pictorial illusionism, the author pieces together a wide range of visual evidence and textual sources to reconstruct the medieval Chinese cognitive style and mental world. The book is ultimately a history of the Chinese imagination.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"This is an original, productive approach to the study of medieval sacred space, and the book makes good on its promise to propose new theoretical models to analyze spatial and conceptual continuity above and below ground. As always, Wang's approach is fresh and provocative: his trenchant phrasing offers a new, sometimes idiosyncratic perspective on old material."

— Journal of Asian Studies

"Shaping the Lotus Sutra is a beautifully illustrated book that connects a dazzling array of visual objects under the intellectual auspices of notions of Chinese medieval world making. . . . it offers a fresh and at time provocative perspective on unsolved problems of Chinese Buddhist art. . . . it is certain to foster more lively discussion and debate. And that is no small achievement."

— Art Bulletin

"Shaping the Lotus Sutra provides novel perspectives for deciphering the medieval Buddhist representation."

— Religious Studies Review

"Eugene Wang has written a challenging, clever, dense and provocative book that is bursting at the seams with insights and ideas. . . . The University of Washington Press deserves our thanks for producing this nicely-made book, which is profusely illustrated and not too expensive for what one gets."

— Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society

"Eugene Wang has succeeded in producing a careful examination of the creation of paradisiacal imagery in the Lotus Sutra..Wang's accomplishment is considerable. Deftly, he applies literary, historical, and scriptural references to visual materials..Wang has achieved visual literacy in reading representations of the Lotus Sutra in medieval China."

— Journal of Chinese Religions

"This book, abundantly illustrated, clarifies the intricate and complex relationships that link the Lotus Sutra with some of its medieval Chinese expressions. Exploration of these issues and themes would be enough to make this book a worthwhile study, but the real attraction here is the rich interpretive perspectives that Wang applies to medieval Chinese transformation tableaux. Staid scholarly views wither as he applies broad knowledge to his explication of Chinese imagery and the tangled relationship between text and image. This book is highly recommended for those who seek a markedly nuanced view of medieval Chinese Buddhist imagery, and its relationship to texts specifically and to medieval Chinese cultural more generally."

— H-Net Reviews

"Wang's remarkable use of materials and sheer intellectual

verve makes one almost feel as if the 1400-year-old Chinese mind has indeed been pried open and revealed its secrets.. Wang's elucidation of this world is a stunning work of intellectual bravado."~ Journal of Asian History"The scholarship embodied in Shaping the Lotus Sutra will have a significant impact on Buddhist art scholarship, raising it to a new level of sophistication, insight, and nuance."~ Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies"The depth and breadth of the visual evidence [Wang] has marshaled is dazzling, as are the intricate connections he draws among the many sources, both literary and visual. . . . All in all, the book is an extraordinary achievement and a must for any collection with a global compass in religion and the arts."~ Religion and the Arts

"Ranges over a dazzling array of topics, all of them fascinating and all tied to the central goal of illuminating the visual logic of medieval Buddhist art."~ Robert E. Harrist, Jr., Columbia University"Shaping the Lotus Sutra ranges over a dazzling array of topics, all of them fascinating and all tied to the central goal of illuminating the visual logic of medieval Buddhist art."~ Robert E. Harrist, Jr., Columbia University"I react to Wang's work like I do to Zizek's: I find it electrifying; it wakes me up to a whole new range of possibilities."~ Jerome Silbergeld, Princeton University"Shaping the Lotus Sutra explores what the medieval Chinese actually believed about spiritual matters, through careful analysis of artistic representations of its most beloved text, the Lotus Sutra, during the crucial early period of the development of Buddhism in China."~ Amy McNair, University of Kansas

A fascinating work by a very thoughtful scholar. The book analyzes and uncovers the underlying desire and demands hidden behind the Buddhist artworks in their historical context, thus providing the readers convincing answers to why and how these artworks were made.

This is an excellent treatment of the Lotus Sutra in Chinese art, primarily focusing on Dunhuang but of use to anyone who wants to gain a further understanding of medieval Chinese murals and sculpture. A basic knowledge of both Buddhism and Buddhist iconography is almost essential but a fast learning, highly motivated beginner would also find this book extremely helpful. No one going to all the trouble to visit the Dunhuang caves should go without reading this book, and anyone who finds this book hard reading or uninteresting with a trip to Dunhuang on their agenda, should choose another destination. For those interested in medieval Chinese Buddhist iconography and pictorial art, this book "pulls it all together" and is both readable and scholarly in its approach. Excellent

photographs and detailed drawings to help one interpret the ancient paintings make this book an invaluable guidebook to Dunhuang or to any armchair traveller. A true find and a book one will be able to reread over and over again as one becomes an increasingly advanced student of the subject.

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