

The Eighteen Arhats

The Arhat, “Luohan” or “Aluohan” in Chinese, is a transliteration from Sanskrit. The word has three denotations: the first is “to kill the thief”, which means to eliminate all the disturbances; the second is “to be venerated”, meaning gaining the veneration of other living things; and the third is “not to be reborn”, which means achieving Nirvana and not being subject to the suffering of “Samsara”, the cycle of reincarnations.

In Buddhism, it is believed that ordinary people have to go through four stages to become an Arhat: Sotapanna, the stage where one “enters the stream”, is the starting point of the path to enlightenment. The second stage is Sakadagami, also known as “Once-returner”, is the stage where people will live one more life before being liberated in the next reincarnation. Anagami, the stage of “No return”, happens when you no longer live in the World of Desire and will not be reborn. Arhat, the fourth and final stage, is reached when a person is liberated from all the disturbances of the three above Worlds - Desire, Form and Formless, thus obtaining the sacred “fruit” of Nirvana and the veneration of other living things.

Hinayana Buddhism (“Small vehicle”) advocates individual self-liberation, with the Arhat stage being the highest “fruit”, meaning the “boundless fruit”; Mahayana Buddhism (“Great vehicle”) advocates the salvation of “all” beings. With the different pursuits and purposes, the definitions of Arhats also vary. In Mahayana Buddhism, Arhat is a stage far from the highest level of Buddhism, which is Buddha, followed by Bodhisattva and then Arhat. Since Arhats have already attained Nirvana in Mahayana Buddhism, they should “live in the world and renounce Nirvana” in order to help others to liberate from suffering and to protect the Buddha’s Dharma.

Among the Buddhist deities, images of Arhats appeared relatively late and are often depicted in sculptures and paintings. Zen Buddhism, flourishing in both the northern and the southern parts of China during the period of the Five Dynasties, advocated introspection and emphasized that the mind should focus on religious practices rather than external factors. The Arhats reflected the relevant Buddhist perspectives and, therefore, won the admiration of the people. Artistic images of the Arhats first appeared during the Liang Dynasty, and Arhats became a dominating theme in Buddhist sculptures and paintings during the Song Dynasty which emphasized “realism”.

The Eighteen Arhats were originally the Sixteen Arhats. Su Shi, the famous writer of the Northern Song Dynasty, dedicated his poems to the Eighteen Arhats after seeing their paintings by Zhang Xuan from Jinshui County, Jianzhou in the Qianshu Kingdom and Guan Xiu of the the Five Dynasties on the island of Hainan. Of the Eighteen Arhats, the seventeenth Arhat is Venerable Qingyou and the eighteenth Venerable Pindola. These were the earliest references of the Eighteen Arhats. Despite constant doubts, continuous inspections help gain popularity for the Eighteen Arhats while dampening that of the Sixteen Arhats.

The “Eighteen Arhats” is an oil painting skillfully painted by the famous Macao painter, Sou Farong (originally known as “Sou Man”) on rice paper based on his enormous knowledge of Buddhism. The Arhats are delineated as traditional Buddhist monks, each in a different “realistic” posture, some posing relaxingly, and others sitting

rigidly and solemnly. In the background of the painting are banana trees, willows, rocks and so on, added with a lion, a dragon, a tiger, a deer and an elephant. Each Arhat is presented in his own style in relation to what precedes and succeeds him, thus revealing the extraordinary imagination and creativity of the painter. This unique oil painting on rice paper has flowing yet powerful lines. Besides integrating elements of traditional Chinese Buddhist paintings, it is also contemporary in style.

The Macao Post and Telecommunications Bureau is issuing two formats of “The Eighteen Arhats” stamps. One is a sheetlet and the other is a sheet of long scroll stamps, each featuring exquisite designs and unique characteristics. The sheet of long scroll stamps consists of a series of 18 stamps on a long horizontal roll, a magnificent philatelic product of high artistic and collection value.

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