

White Path between Two Rivers

An Excellent Buddhist Painting from the Thirteenth Century

Golden Week Lecture Series— Four Masterpieces of Japanese Painting: A Symposium

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To start off my talk, I would like to read a short Buddhist narrative that was written in ancient China. Imagine what this story would look like if illustrated.

There was a man on a journey, headed west. Suddenly he saw two rivers in the distance. To the south was a river of fire, and to the north a river of cold water. The width of both rivers was just a hundred footsteps, but both rivers were bottomless and ran in either direction endlessly. Right in the middle of these two rivers was a white path. It was only four-five inches wide, a hundred steps long and it connected the eastern and western banks. Water from the north river was washing over the narrow path, and at the same time, fire from the south river relentlessly burned the path. With no one else around, bandits and vicious beasts started chasing the man and were competing to catch and kill him. Consequently, the man ran forward to the west and suddenly these two rivers came into sight. He could not see the end of either river, only the white path in the middle that would take him to the opposite bank. It was extremely narrow and dangerous. If he went back to the east, the bandits would kill him. If he ran to the north or south along the bank, the vicious beasts and poisonous vermin would catch him. Standing still or going in any direction along this side of the bank meant certain death. If he wanted to escape this desperate situation, he had to go west by crossing the white path. Upon realizing this, he suddenly heard a voice coming from the eastern bank. It said, "If you are wise, you only have to decide to go this way, and you will be saved from death. However, if you stop on the path, you will die." From the western bank another voice shouted, "You only have to believe and come this way. If you do so, I will protect you as you cross to this side. Do not be afraid if you fall into the river of fire or the river of water." Hearing these voices, the man made up his mind and started walking on the white path without any doubts or thoughts of turning around. Ten steps, twenty steps he went forward, and the bandit on the eastern bank cried out behind him, "Come back! This path is too treacherous to pass. We are sure you will die. Even though we have been chasing you, we mean you no harm." Even as this voice reached the man he never looked back, he was intent on crossing the path. Upon reaching the western bank he was immediately free from any troubles and he spent a pleasurable and comfortable life with his virtuous friend for eternity.

This story was written by the Buddhist master Shan-dao (善導 613-681), active in China in the seventh century. Shan-dao was the most prolific educator of Pure Land Buddhism and is regarded as the third great master of this sect. His texts were also extremely influential upon Japanese

Buddhism.

As you are probably already aware, this story is a Buddhist parable. “Going on a journey toward the west” means, going toward the Western Pure Land. The Western Pure Land is a Buddhist paradise where the Buddha of Infinite Light Amitabha in Sanskrit, (Amida Buddha in Japanese) resides. If people can make it there at the end of this life, they will obtain eternal relief from the suffering in this world. Otherwise, they will be unable to escape the perpetual cycle of reincarnation, in which they will be reborn in one of six realms; as a being living in heaven, a human being, a warrior in an endless battle, beasts, a miserable hungry ghost or living a horrible life in hell. People can even be reborn as divinities. The realm into which one is reincarnated depends on the good or bad things they have done in this life.

“The river of fire” represents a world of anger and hatred found in human relations. “The river of water” symbolizes the evil passion of greed and the endless desire in humans. “The bandits and vicious beasts” are evil spirits, and also represent heresies outside Buddhist teachings. “The voice from the eastern bank” represents the teachings of the Historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, who is believed to have lived in this world. “The voice from the western bank” is the sermon of the Amida Buddha, coming from the Western Paradise. So it was possible that this man could reach the Pure Land by believing in the voices of both Buddhas and by being met by “the good friend,” Amida Buddha. As a result, the man escaped the cycle of reincarnation, and was able to obtain eternal relief from suffering.

“The white path between two rivers” represents the minute possibility of awakening faith out of various evil passions and troubles in this world. This story encourages people to actively and enthusiastically believe in Pure Land Buddhist teachings in order to acquire piece of mind and reach the Western Paradise after this life.

This text by Shan-Dao was included in his writing *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*, and it is the work he is best known for. It is generally said that this parable was popular in China during his lifetime. Visual images of this parable are not found in China. There are, however, extant examples from thirteenth century Japan.

In Japan, it is generally thought that Japanese Buddhist masters Hōnen (法然 1133-1212) and Shinran (親鸞 1173-1262) quoted this parable in their own writings, and beginning in the thirteenth century it became a direct source for the visual representation. Hōnen established the *Jōdo-shū*, or Pure Land School, and Shinran founded *Jōdo-shinshū*, or True Pure Land School, in Japan. Therefore, it is natural to think that this parable was well known among Japanese Pure Land School believers since that time.

This is an image of the *White Path between Two Rivers* (二河白道図 or *Niga byakudō-zu* in Japanese), from the permanent collection of the Seattle Art Museum.¹ Painted by an unknown artist, the estimated date of this piece ranges from the fourteenth century up to the present. The painting is

made of ink, color and gold leaf on silk cloth, and it is thought that this image was originally made as a hanging scroll. Before getting into the main focus of my talk, let me briefly mention how this painting was changed as a result of the recent conservation project.

In 1968 – almost forty years ago – this painting was repaired and framed with fixed glass. This kind of change to the format was frequently done in museums in the United States at that time. However, the glass created a bad reflection and dust had settled under the glass. This made the image appear rather dull, and it was hard to see the details.²

Last year the painting underwent conservation at a conservation studio in Tokyo. The painting's lining paper was replaced with new lining paper, and it was given a new brocade mounting in a hanging scroll format, thus returning it to its original format.³ Of course, no new pigments were added to the original painting, but when I looked at this painting following the work I was very surprised to see how sharp, elegant and minute every detail had been rendered. In this case, the opportunity to repair this painting allowed me to re-discover the details that had been difficult to see. The focus of my talk is based on the result of this re-examination of this excellent image.



White Path between Two Rivers, Japanese, 13th century, hangingscroll, ink, color and gold on silk, 32 3/8 x 15 5/8 in., Margaret E. Fuller Purchase Fund, 56.182

Among various questions you might have regarding this work, I would like to discuss three points. The first point addresses the iconography of the painting. The second addresses the composition and how it was formed. The third will address the significance of this painting within Japanese art history.

Up to the present, eleven examples of *White Path between Two Rivers*, made in the 13th and 14th centuries, have been confirmed in temples and museums in Japan and the United States. I will compare our painting with others, and discuss the placement of this painting in the category of *White Path between Two Rivers*.

As described in the parable, the painting depicts the three cardinal directions. The bottom section of the painting represents this world: the two rivers are depicted to the north and south of the middle, and the Western Paradise is located at the top, where heavenly beings are seen flying in the sky. The entire image is roughly divided into three sections. Let's take a closer look at the details, beginning at the bottom and moving our way up to the Western

Paradise. This section represents life in this world, which is not described in the parable.⁴ Two residential buildings are depicted at an angle and the rear section of each is covered by misty air. It is possible to see two indoor scenes in each residence. A horse and a man are at the center and trees, some of which are cherry trees, complete the landscape.

In the left scene of the residence, upon closer examination, it is possible to see that this is a scene with two noblemen playing the *biwa*, a Japanese lute, and a flute. A banquet or music ensemble such as this is frequently seen in the illustration of pleasure scenes of the aristocracy.⁵

In the right scene it is difficult to confirm each motif, but it is possible to see that a couple is surrounded by various objects, such as lacquer ware and rolls of fabric inside the home and also on the veranda outside.

In the right scene at the right residence, though it is hard to see, there is a couple seated in a room and they appear to be using armrests. It seems that the woman is putting on a coverlet. I'm not sure what this scene means, but an interesting motif I found recently is a tiny monkey on the ground outside that appears to be looking in at this couple. Meanwhile, the left scene at this residence is the most difficult to understand. There appear to be two people and some other paintings have given me the idea that this scene represents someone's death, but I am still not sure.

The most important element in this section is the flames coming out of the roofs of both homes. Even if we acquire great wealth, can afford many things and enjoy life, it is impossible to avoid getting sick and eventually dying. The house, people, and material goods are all empty dreams. Everything is ephemeral, as are the short-lived cherry blossoms.

Nevertheless, humans are unable to control their own worldly passions and desires, which is the tragic nature of human beings. Here is an out-of-control horse, jumping and dragging a man behind him. It appears that he has already lost hold of the reins. It is generally accepted that the inability to control a horse is a visual metaphor for the viciousness of people's worldly passions. This is also not written in the parable but is mentioned in several other old Buddhist texts. A similar image of horse and rider can be seen in a battle scene from many genre paintings, as in the example shown here.⁶

Let's look at the cherry tree again, depicted above the horse. Surprisingly there is another monkey (this one is half-an-inch long) climbing up the trunk, looking down, probably at the horse. From ancient times in Japanese folk belief, the monkey has had a deep relationship with the horse. It is believed to be the guardian deity of the horse that kept the horse in the stable. I think this may explain the distraught state of the horse as he has lost his guardian. As mentioned in the parable, a man is running because he is being chased.⁷ In this painting, this man is a Buddhist monk wearing a monochrome kimono with a *kesa* outer garment. From the east, six bandits, some of whom are wearing armor, can be seen chasing the monk. Animals, including a dog and boar, come from the south, and four snakes approach from the north.

Here it is possible to see the two rivers depicted with vivid color contrast. On the left, a couple is being submerged into the raging flames of fire. The man is beating the woman with a whip, which is an expression of his passions of anger or hate. On the right a couple is being placed in the

waves of cold water, holding a baby and surrounded by worldly possessions. This represents their minds clouded by their love of material goods.

Close to the white path, if you look carefully, you can see something very small. These are some scrolls rendered in a dark color (I think originally it was painted dark blue) and placed on what is most likely a red lacquer stand. Referring to other Buddhist paintings, I believe that these scrolls are a set of the *Lotus Sutra*, a popular Buddhist sutra. Locating this sutra in this world is a visual symbol of Buddhist teaching and is the Buddhist believer's foundation. Moreover, in this painting, it represents "the voice of Buddha, urging the monk to cross the white path" which is mentioned in the parable.

Here is another person, on the opposite side of the sutras, watching the monk cross the path, and there is something on the ground behind him. It is difficult to see, but it is his discarded armor. Maybe seeing this kind of example can help you envision the armor.⁸ If you recall the parable, this man is crying out toward the monk already walking on the path, urging him to come back. The discarded armor shows that he is pretending to be a good person, but in reality it is just a trick to get the monk to return to his side of the riverbank.

The monk is depicted twice here, once at the bank and again on the path. This is a conventional technique used for depicting the passage of time within the same picture. This is also convenient for showing the development of a story. The visual image of the Western Paradise was introduced to Japan from China in the eighth century during the Nara Period. Based on a fully equipped and symmetrical image of the Pure Land, the Japanese made a simplified image suited to the space of a painting, as can be seen here.⁹

The Western Paradise is believed to be a clean and richly adorned place where there is a beautiful pond; buildings and trees decorated with jewels, precious stones and gold; birds sing with melodious voices; and the fragrance of beautiful flowers is eternal. Amida Buddha is standing close to the western bank, urging the monk to believe in his teaching and protection in order to cross the narrow path.¹⁰ We can see that this painting shows a happy ending because the figure of the monk, again, appears in the Pure Land together with the Bodhisattvas. Flowers and a peacock are additional visual symbols of heavenly beauty.

Above this scene, we see Amida Buddha seated on an adorned throne, which sits on a lotus stand, with two bodhisattvas on either side. Directly in front of them is a music and dance performance.

The representation of the ground in the Pure Land is also different from that of this world. The water's edge shows a smooth round shape, and the ground is depicted in a white color with *kirikane* (an extremely thin gold leaf glued over the painted background) decoration. The color of gold can be seen only in the representation of the Pure Land.

I believe that the water was originally painted in a bright blue, but the color has changed into a dark blue-brown because blue pigment is very sensitive. It is easily oxidized which damages the silk (as you can see many parts of the silk are missing). The blue color must have been resplendent, representing the rich and clean water of the Pure Land. At the very top of the image, there are two heavenly beings flying in the sky. These are also depicted on a very small scale.

We have now examined every motif and scene in this painting and it is clear that the image of the

White Path between Two Rivers is comprised of various Buddhist icons and metaphors, which were commonly shared among monks and believers. In other words, the majority of this image was created by integrating the Buddhist visual vocabulary of the time.

With regard to this painting, there are no extant documents or materials that tell us why and how this painting was made. Therefore, we have to conduct detective work on the painting itself.

As you see in *White Path between Two Rivers*, when we trace the development of the story and look at the composition of each scene, it naturally guides us to view the scene from the lower right corner to the upper left. Accordingly, our eyes should move diagonally across the painting in order to follow the story. This directional movement is popular in Japanese art, especially in the illustrated story, as seen in the handscroll format.

A handscroll is a convenient format for an individual to view an illustrated story.¹¹ As a person unrolls the handscroll section by section, the next scene or text comes into sight and the viewer reads and sees the illustration of the story at the same time. In a handscroll, time always passes from the right to the left. Therefore, as you see in this example, the main character moves from the right to the left. The structures, such as a house or a gate, are depicted on a slanted angle, in order to show how he passes through the structure. The same figure is sometimes depicted multiple times in one scene in order to depict the development of a story. In this format, an unknown situation or object, or an unexpected or monstrous figure (demons in this example) face right for a surprise encounter with the main character. Hopefully it is clear that the person who created the visual format for this image knew this visual technique of rendering each scene very well, and piled each scene on top of one another to make one image into a hanging scroll.

A hanging scroll differs from a handscroll in that it is designed to show an image to an individual or many people. In ancient and medieval times, many believers learned Buddhist teachings not from reading the texts but from visual images, which were orally explained by Buddhist priests or specialists. Currently in Japan, there are some Buddhist temples that still offer an “explain-a-picture lecture” or *etoki* for the public.¹² While pointing out each scene, the lecturer is able to explain the story that is illustrated in a hanging scroll. So, was *our White Path between Two Rivers* also created for use at a temple *etoki*? Let me discuss my thought on this matter a bit later.

There are a number of *White Path between Two Rivers* paintings dating from the thirteenth century onward. We don't know exactly when the basic composition and elements of this image was established but we can say that once it became codified and popularized, small things would change but from that time on similar images were produced. The extant examples, all of which are hanging scrolls, are believed to have been created between the 13th-14th centuries. Including SAM's painting, there are eleven in existence. Let me first briefly mention the third category.¹³ The image in this category (of which there are two paintings) depicts two Buddhas, Shakyamuni in this world and Amida Buddha in the Western Paradise, as the central focus rather than the white path. In this image, the essence of the narrative is diminished, and the conceptual image becomes more prominent. The

elements depicted in each painting are almost the same but again, the composition and perspective vary.

Paintings in category one (of which there are three extant examples), have a symmetrical order.¹⁴ The white path is placed at the center and extends to a fully frontal Amida Buddha. The houses are also depicted with this same symmetry. The Kōmyō-ji version is regarded as the oldest surviving example of *White Path between Two Rivers*, and is thought to have been created in the mid-thirteenth century. When viewers are seated in front of this image, how do they feel and how do they experience this painting? I think that their eyes became the eyes of the man in the painting, or their eyes followed the man, walking from the bottom to the top right into the Pure Land. Currently two works are in collections outside Japan: one is at the Seattle Art Museum and the other one is at the Cleveland Museum of Art.¹⁵ The Cleveland Museum's version belongs to this first category and was created in the fourteenth century.

Paintings in Category two, of which there are six extant, including the Seattle Art Museum's version, all have a diagonal movement. Here some differences can be found in each work. The Kōsetsu Museum version has several people waiting in a line to cross the white path. Here, the visual story has been expanded to appeal to all – men, women, old and young.¹⁶ The Seiryō-ji version has a kind of bird's-eye view perspective, looking down on the scene below.¹⁷ The motifs are depicted on a small scale, as if this story is happening off in the distance. From an artistic point of view this should be dated later so these two paintings are, I believe, from the fourteenth century. Among these works belonging to the second category I would like to focus on these two images, one from Nara National Museum and the other from a private collection in Aichi, as comparisons with the Seattle Art Museum's version.¹⁸

The Nara and Aichi versions are thought to have been created in the second half of the thirteenth century and they are quite similar to each other. Art historians believe that the Nara version is a simplified version of the Aichi painting. The similarity between these two allows us to presume that this type of "White Path between Two Rivers" painting was produced in many temples of the Pure Land School and True Pure Land School during this period. Meanwhile, still in the same category, the expression, composition and color, in other words the "style" of the Seattle Art Museum's version looks quite different from these two. The well-balanced composition of the Seattle Art Museum painting focuses on the two rivers in the middle, while also placing an emphasis on the bank of the Pure Land. The representation of "this world" in the lower section of the painting is elegantly depicted with subtle coloration. The mist is also delicately rendered and does not emphasize the outline as is the case in the fourteenth century work. The body of the Buddha from the private collection is painted entirely in gold, which was a typical technique for depicting Buddha from the thirteenth century (Kamakura period), onward. Whereas the Seattle Art Museum's Amida Buddha is not in gold but rather a flesh color paint with a gold outline (made of *kirikane*), which is an older style. Furthermore, the gentle facial features and slender body proportions with a slightly larger head is also suggestive of an older style, as compared with the voluminous expression seen in the example in the Buddha from the private collection painting.

Before being repaired, it was believed that the Seattle Art Museum's version was most likely

created in the fourteenth century. As far as I can understand, the main reason for this was that the “elegant and minute rendition” of this painting was regarded as “decorative,” and such a decorative style must have come later than the typical style of paintings yielded during the thirteenth century, which are the earliest existing examples. However, when I compared each motif with the Nara and Aichi versions, both of which were created in the late thirteenth century, I have to say that we should rethink this date because the technique, color scheme and several motifs are indicative of an older style than the others and some parts even remind me of the previous age, the Heian period.

Another point is its composition. Compared with the other examples, which show a more complex composition and additional motifs, the Seattle Art Museum’s version’s composition is clear (in the direction from right to left), and a development of the story is clearer to see. The expression of each scene (a relationship of each motif) looks more natural. I think this plainness indicates a close interpretation of the original text. Once a basic image became popular, some objects were added and the composition became complex in order to have more variety. But this tendency causes a loss in close contact among each motif, accordingly making it hard to trace the visual story.

Synthesizing these aspects of the Seattle Art Museum’s version from a stylistic point of view, my current thinking is that it should really be considered as a work from the early to mid-thirteenth century. This would mean that the Seattle Art Museum’s painting is the oldest example of *White Path between Two Rivers*.

The last thing I would like to say is that this painting is a very special one created by a highly skilled painter at what must have been a great cost. Despite this we still do not know who commissioned this image or where it was displayed. Considering the small size of the image, I am working on proving that this image was created by a high-ranking artist at the request of someone from a noble family for their private use rather than for use at an *etoki* at a temple.

I can however state with certainty that the *White Path between Two Rivers* in the collection of the Seattle Art Museum is incomparably elegant, and is a rare example of this subject in this category. I would like to say it was created not in the late but in the early part of the thirteenth century, during the Kamakura period. Its beauty and art historical significance are magnificent, and it is a treasure of the Seattle Art Museum.

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¹ *White Path between Two Rivers*, Kamakura period (1185-1333), ink, color and gold on silk, 32 3/8 x 15 5/8 inches, Seattle Art Museum, Margaret E. Fuller Purchase Fund, 56.182.

² *White Path between Two Rivers*, SAM, overall image before conservation.

³ *White Path between Two Rivers*, SAM, overall image after conservation.

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- 4 Details of bottom section from *White Path between Two Rivers*, SAM.
- 5 Segment of *Narrative Picture of scroll of The Tale of Sumiyoshi*, Important Art Object, Tokyo National Museum.
- 6 Scenes from *Narrative Picture of scroll of The Tale of Heiji Insurrection*, volume of Night Attack on Sanjō palace, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
- 7 Details of middle section from *White Path between Two Rivers*, SAM.
- 8 Scene from *Narrative Picture of scroll of The Tale of Heiji Insurrection*, volume of Night Attack on Sanjō palace, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
- 9 *Amida Jōdo Mandala*, Important Cultural Property, Saizen-in, Kōya-san, Wakayama.
- 10 Details of top section from *White Path between Two Rivers*, SAM.
- 11 Scenes from *Scroll of the Illustrated Biography of Priest Kōbō Daishi*, Important Cultural Property, Tōji, Kyoto.
- 12 Photograph of *etoki*.
- 13 *White Path between Two Rivers*, Seijōkō-ji, Kyoto.
- 14 *White Path between Two Rivers*, Important Cultural Property, Kōmyō-ji, Kyoto.
- 15 *White Path between Two Rivers*, Cleveland Museum of Art.
- 16 *White Path between Two Rivers*, Important Cultural Property, Kōsetsu Museum of Art, Hyogo.
- 17 *White Path between Two Rivers*, Seiryō-ji, Kyoto.
- 18 *White Path between Two Rivers*, Important Cultural Property, Nara National Museum.
White Path between Two Rivers, Important Cultural Property, private collection (Aichi).