

# Artistic Devotion of Buddhist Women in Late Imperial China - Premodern East Asia

In the complex tapestry of premodern East Asian society, Buddhist women played a significant role in the artistic landscape. Over the centuries, they showcased their talents, devotion, and creativity through various art forms, leaving a profound impact on the cultural heritage of late Imperial China. This article explores the journey of artistic devotion undertaken by Buddhist women during this period.

## A Glimpse into Late Imperial China

Late Imperial China, spanning from the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) to the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912), witnessed a flourishing of Buddhism and its integration into the local culture. During this time, Buddhist women formed a distinct group within society, seeking spiritual enlightenment while engaging in various artistic endeavors.

## The Role of Buddhist Women

Buddhism provided an opportunity for women to attain spiritual liberation and fulfill their artistic aspirations. Unlike Confucianism, which confined women to domestic roles, Buddhism encouraged women to participate actively in religious practices and express their creativity through art. Buddhist nuns or laywomen became adept in calligraphy, painting, sculpture, poetry, and music, making significant contributions to the artistic heritage of their time.

**Becoming Guanyin: Artistic Devotion of Buddhist Women in Late Imperial China (Premodern East Asia: New Horizons)** by Yuhang Li (Kindle Edition)

★★★★★ 5 out of 5

Language : English



File size : 25452 KB  
Text-to-Speech : Enabled  
Enhanced typesetting : Enabled  
Print length : 316 pages  
Screen Reader : Supported



## Calligraphy and Painting

Artistic expression through calligraphy and painting became integral to the lives of Buddhist women. Many nuns and laywomen developed remarkable skills in these forms, creating beautiful scrolls, illustrations, and portraits. The meticulous strokes and vibrant colors showcased their devotion, often depicting Buddhist deities or scripts. Some works served as religious artifacts, while others found their way into the private collections of scholars and influential figures.

## Sculpture and Ceramics

Buddhist women also excelled in sculpture and ceramics. Through these mediums, they crafted intricate statues of Buddha, bodhisattvas, and other divine beings. The sculptures not only displayed technical mastery but also reflected the spiritual devotion of their creators. They adorned temples and monasteries, inviting worshippers to connect with the divine through the tangible beauty of these artworks.

## Poetry and Music

Many Buddhist women in late Imperial China showcased their artistic devotion through the written word and music. They composed profound poetry, often

exploring themes of spirituality, impermanence, and inner peace. Their verses were deeply introspective, captivating readers with their insights into the human experience and the quest for enlightenment. Additionally, Buddhist women embraced music, composing hymns and songs that celebrated Buddhist teachings and enriched the religious ceremonies.

## **Challenges and Achievements**

Despite facing societal barriers, Buddhist women persevered in their artistic pursuits, leaving an impressive legacy. Their works of art not only exhibited technical excellence but also captured the essence of Buddhist teachings. These women challenged gender norms, finding fulfillment in their devotion to Buddhism and the expression of their creativity.

## **An Enduring Legacy**

The artistic devotion of Buddhist women in late Imperial China played a vital role in shaping the cultural landscape of premodern East Asia. Their artworks continue to inspire and awe audiences, reflecting the depth of their spiritual dedication and creativity. Today, many of these masterpieces are celebrated as treasures of the art world, connecting us with the rich legacy of Buddhist women in East Asia.

As we delve into the history of premodern East Asia, the artistic devotion of Buddhist women stands out as a testament to their resilience, creativity, and spiritual commitment. Through calligraphy, painting, sculpture, poetry, and music, these remarkable women left an indelible mark on the cultural heritage of late Imperial China. Their enduring legacy serves as an inspiration for women across generations, showcasing the transformative power of art and devotion.



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The goddess Guanyin began in India as the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, originally a male deity. He gradually became indigenized as a female deity in China over the span of nearly a millennium. By the Ming (1358–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) periods, Guanyin had become the most popular female deity in China. In *Becoming Guanyin*, Yuhang Li examines how lay Buddhist women in late imperial China forged a connection with the subject of their devotion, arguing that women used their own bodies to echo that of Guanyin.

Li focuses on the power of material things to enable women to access religious experience and transcendence. In particular, she examines how secular Buddhist women expressed mimetic devotion and pursued religious salvation through creative depictions of Guanyin in different media such as painting and embroidery and through bodily portrayals of the deity using jewelry and dance. These material displays expressed a worldview that differed from yet fit within the Confucian patriarchal system. Attending to the fabrication and use of “women’s things” by secular women, Li offers new insight into the relationships between worshipped and worshipper in Buddhist practice. Combining empirical research with theoretical insights from both art history and Buddhist studies, *Becoming*

Guanyin is a field-changing analysis that reveals the interplay between material culture, religion, and their gendered transformations.



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