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# A Study of Guan Xiu's Sixteen Luohans (Palace Collection): The Artistic Integration of Centralized Composition and Spiritual Resonance

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**Abstract:** Composition is the primary element in a painting. Different compositional designs produce varying visual effects and evoke distinct impacts on viewers. Using the classic work *Sixteen Luohans* as an example, this article explores how its concentrated depiction of figures complements and mutually enhances the effect of «spiritual blank space».

**Keywords:** composition;figure painting;spiritual blank space;sixteen luohans

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## 1. Introduction: A Masterpiece of Spiritual Portraiture

The Imperial Household Agency version of the “Sixteen Luohan” paintings stands as a classic masterpiece by Guan Xiu., a monk artist of the fifth dynasty of the late Tang Dynasty. Currently treasured within the Japanese Imperial Household Agency, it commands significant scholarly and public attention. This version, executed on silk, measures 92.2 cm in height and 45.4 cm in width for each scroll. Its relatively large size and compact layout suggest it belongs to the same stylistic lineage as the Sheng

Yin Temple version. This lineage is widely recognized within academia as the system that most fully manifests Guan Xiu’s creative intentions and artistic conception, thereby possessing relatively higher artistic value<sup>[1]</sup>. It represents a significant milestone in the history of Chinese figure painting. Renowned for its unique artistic style and profound spiritual depth, these paintings serve as invaluable materials for studying Five Dynasties period painting and Buddhist art. In terms of pictorial composition, the Imperial Household Agency version exhibits an exceptionally high artistic standard. The layout is rigorous yet dynamic. The painter skillfully employs contrasts between elements, integrating the Luohan figures with their surrounding environmental features in a powerful manner. This results in a compositional approach centered on the concentrated expression of the figures. Moreover, this singularly focused, highly concentrated, and exclusive compositional form engenders a unique mode of emotional expression within the work: “spiritual blankness”. This concept, while sharing the philosophical roots of traditional Chinese pictorial “blankness” (留白), operates through a paradoxical principle of *visual saturation* to achieve *conceptual openness*.

## 2. Analysis of Concentrated Single-Figure Composition

### 2.1. The Design of Concentrated Single-Figure Composition

Prior to Guan Xiu, traditional Chinese figure painting was predominantly didactic or narrative in purpose. From the admonitions depicted in tomb murals to the grand historical or religious narratives adorning temple walls and scrolls, the primary function was often to instruct, commemorate, or propagate specific doctrines or ideologies. Classic figure paintings like Gu Kaizhi's "Admonitions of the Instructress to the Court Ladies" or Yan Liben's "Portraits of Emperors of Previous Dynasties" relied heavily on multi-figure scenes, intricate interactions, and contextual props to convey their stories and messages<sup>[2]</sup>. Even ostensibly single-figure portraits, such as those of emperors in Yan Liben's work, typically required the inclusion of attendants or significant contextual elements to signify status and complete the narrative scene. This narrative-dominant model was particularly ingrained in the era before Guan Xiu. Figure painting, especially large-scale or imperial commissions, still served significant political, religious, and didactic purposes. Guan Xiu's "Sixteen Luohan," however, initiated a shift away from this mainstream compositional approach. Guan Xiu designed each composition around a single figure, where the individual Luohan occupies the central position and the majority of the pictorial space, establishing a compositional form centered on the concentrated expression of a single subject. The figure is not part of a story; it is the statement.

Within the "Sixteen Luohan," the Luohan figure serves as the core subject. Its placement is meticulously conceived by the artist to fully reveal the Luohan's spiritual character and unique aura. In the Imperial Household Agency version, the Luohan is positioned centrally within the composition. The figure occupies 60%-70% of the total pictorial area, emphasizing its dominant status and drawing the viewer's gaze. Upon the narrow, vertical silk, such imposing Luohan figures sit; indeed, for aesthetic effect in some scrolls, parts of the Luohan extend beyond the picture frame, leaving the cropped sections to the viewer's imagination, as seen in the depiction of the Fifteenth Luohan, Ajita (**Figure 1**). Such a large proportion dedicated to a single figure was an extremely rare occurrence in traditional Chinese figure painting. In fact, Guan Xiu can arguably be considered the pioneer in this regard. This compositional design endows the Luohan figures in the "Sixteen Luohan" with a unique expressive power. When viewing the work, the viewer's entire attention is captivated by the Luohan, leaving little capacity to observe peripheral details. Combined with the bizarre, archaic, and imposing forms of the Luohan, this creates an intense, direct, and unconcealed impact on the viewer's senses. This visceral confrontation bypasses the intellectualized, narrative appreciation typical of earlier figure painting, aiming instead for an immediate, almost physical, experience of the Luohan's transcendent and awe-inspiring nature.

### 2.2. The Supporting Role of Background and Props

Excessiveness invites deficiency. A composition centered on a single figure cannot consist solely of the figure itself, as this risks monotony and limits the comprehensiveness of the figure's portrayal. Furthermore, the shape of a single figure often struggles to ensure the overall aesthetic harmony of the painting's form. Therefore, appropriate backgrounds and props are necessary. In the Imperial Household Agency version, the Luohan typically occupies the lower-central area of the composition. The small void below is usually filled by the rock or wooden block upon which the Luohan sits. Minor props, such as shoes or mats, further supplement these spaces. These elements effectively fill the compositional voids, making the distribution of pictorial "blocks" more cohesive and enhancing the beauty of the overall "silhouette". In terms of pictorial elements, the depiction of the Luohan



**Figure 1.** *The Fifteenth Luohan* from «Sixteen Luohan.» Guan Xiu, Five Dynasties Ink and Color on silk, 92.2cm × 45.4cm, Image Imperial Household Agency, Japan.

relies predominantly on soft, fine, and dense lines. The introduction of rocks and wood introduces greater diversity in line usage<sup>[3]</sup>. Harsh, angular lines used for these elements create a strong contrast with the softer lines defining the figure. This contrast intensifies the pictorial impact. However, since the background/props occupy minimal space, they do not compete with the figure, thereby further accentuating the expression of the Luohan, as exemplified by the First Luohan, Piṇḍola Bhāradvāja (**Figure 2**)

### 3. Analysis of “Spiritual Blankness”

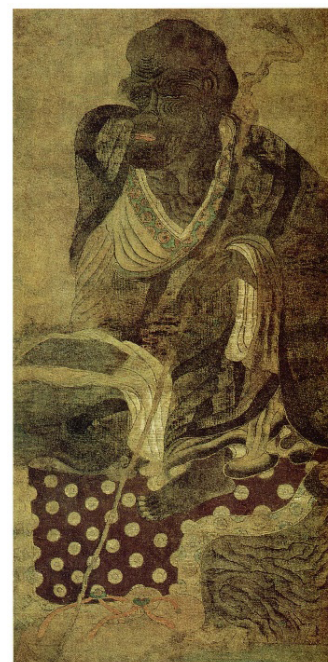
#### 3.1. Elaboration on “Spiritual Blankness”

“Blankness” is a fundamental principle in Chinese painting and aesthetics, deeply rooted in Daoist and Chan Buddhist philosophies (particularly concepts of wu emptiness, and the ineffable). It generally involves the deliberate use of unpainted space or the suggestive outline of forms to evoke what is absent, achieving the effect of “absence implying presence”<sup>[4]</sup>. It invites the viewer to participate actively in completing the image mentally. The concept of “spiritual blankness” (精神留白) proposed in this paper operates with the same core intent – to stimulate the viewer’s imagination and provide expansive psychological space – but manifests through a paradoxical opposite means. Instead of relying on visual absence, “spiritual blankness” is an artistic technique achieved through the intense, hyper-saturated, and meticulously detailed depiction of a single subject (physical “fullness” or shi 实). This saturated depiction is deliberately stripped of explicit narrative context, specific setting, or easily decipherable emotional cues. The aim is to evoke an infinite, personalized space for imagination and interpretation (spiritual “emptiness” or xu 虚) within the viewer’s mind.

It transcends merely depicting the subject’s external form; the entire picture is dedicated to expressing this single entity (the Luohan), emphasizing the absolute singularity of content. The viewer’s gaze is relentlessly guided and held by this thorough, almost overwhelming, depiction. However, a single entity, no matter how intensely rendered, inherently struggles to convey a single, specific narrative point or unambiguous emotional nuance. The very intensity and ambiguity of the depiction become the catalyst. Consequently, the expressive content of paintings employing “spiritual blankness” becomes fluid, indeterminate, and deeply personal, varying significantly from viewer to viewer based on their own experiences, beliefs, and psychological state. This technique actively invites, even demands, that the viewer engage their own thoughts, emotions, and spiritual intuition while confronting the work. This heightened, subjective interaction endows the painting with extraordinary and enduring allure. Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* is perhaps the most famous Western example of this principle. Leonardo employed a concentrated bust composition and masterful, hyper-detailed sfumato technique, rendering the face and expression with exquisite subtlety. Crucially, he avoided any prescriptive or easily categorized expression (joy, sorrow, etc.). This deliberate ambiguity allowed the *Mona Lisa*’s smile to spark centuries of global debate and myriad interpretations. Diverse audiences project their own meanings onto her enigmatic visage. This boundless realm of mental association, triggered by intense visual focus on an ambiguous subject, is the quintessential goal of “spiritual blankness.” The painter avoids providing specific direction or narrative guidance within the painting, instead allowing the meaning to remain blurred, serving solely as a powerful catalyst for the viewer’s own contemplation and projection.

#### 3.2. Concrete Manifestations of “Spiritual Blankness”

In the Imperial Household Agency version of the “Sixteen Luohan,” the portrayal of each Luohan exemplifies the



**Figure 2.** *The First Luohan* from «Sixteen Luohan,» Guan Xiu, Five Dynasties Ink and Color on silk, 92.2cm × 45.4cm, Image Imperial Household Agency, Japan.

concentrated expression of a single subject. Through meticulous depiction of facial expressions, postures, and other details, Guan Xiu provokes profound contemplation in the viewer. This enables the viewer, while appreciating the artwork, to penetrate the surface appearance and grasp deeper spiritual connotations. Take the Twelfth Luohan, Nāgasena (**Figure 3**), as an example. On one hand, Guan Xiu utilizes the concentrated figure composition and his own superb technical skill. Employing the delicate, elongated “ancient gossamer-line drawing”<sup>[5]</sup>, he vividly renders a Luohan with bulging eyes, furrowed brows, and a gaping mouth revealing his tongue. Much like the Mona Lisa’s smile, this exaggerated, even somewhat grotesque, form etches the Luohan’s image deeply into the viewer’s mind, simultaneously obscuring a singular interpretation. Such extreme figural depiction is a prerequisite for achieving “spiritual blankness.” On the other hand, like da Vinci, Guan Xiu creates space for personalized interpretation of the Luohan. The depiction of each Luohan seems suggestive yet remains non-specific, allowing viewers to develop their own unique understanding. This guides viewers towards a direct encounter with the Luohan’s formidable presence and facilitates an appreciation of Buddhist doctrine’s essence. As Su Shi praised their “unconventionality” the Qianlong Emperor noted their “majesty”<sup>[6]</sup>, and the *Xuanhe Painting Catalogue* recorded them as «awe-inspiring»<sup>[7]</sup>, countless Buddhist devotees revered them as objects of worship, sensing the profound depth and unique charm of Buddhist culture<sup>[8]</sup>. This potent yet implicit expressive method not only embodies the aesthetic pursuit of traditional Chinese painting but also provides viewers with a vast space for contemplation. It allows viewers to interpret the work personally based on their life experiences and insights, fostering a deeper emotional resonance.



**Figure 3.** *The Twelfth Luohan* from «Sixteen Luohan,» Guan Xiu, Five Dynasties, Ink and Color on silk, 92.2cm × 45.4 Imperial Household Agency, Japan.

## 4. The Interrelationship between Composition and “Spiritual Blankness”

### 4.1. The Supporting Role of Composition for “Spiritual Blankness”

The intense formal saturation and visual monopoly provided by the concentrated single-figure composition are not merely stylistic choices; they furnish the essential spatial and perceptual foundation upon which “spiritual blankness” is built. This composition acts as its crucial prerequisite. Taking the Imperial Household Agency version as our reference, Guan Xiu’s compositional design involves the careful, deliberate arrangement of the position, scale, and relative dominance of every depicted element. By maximizing the area occupied by the Luohan subject, Guan Xiu gains the necessary “canvas” within the crowded frame for exceptionally detailed and vivid depiction. This saturation of detail within the confined focus intensifies the Luohan’s transcendent, almost overwhelming image.

Furthermore, the strategic use of contrasts – primarily the distinction in line quality (gossamer vs. rough-hewn strokes) and potentially color (though muted in these monochrome-dominant works) – based on the material differences between the primary subject (the Luohan’s flesh, robes) and secondary elements (rock, wood) serves a critical function. It heightens the perceptual contrast between the primary subject and its supporting elements. The Luohan, rendered with intricate, dense lines, appears vividly present, almost tangible, while the background, with its sparser, rougher treatment, recedes visually and psychologically. Through these compositional strategies, Guan Xiu establishes an absolute visual monopoly. He exclusively directs the viewer’s focus onto the Luohan, eliminating competing visual claims. This monopolistic focus is the engine that drives “spiritual blankness.” By forcing the viewer to confront only this intensely rendered, ambiguous figure, the composition creates a vacuum of explicit meaning and a multi-layered space for subjective projection. Viewers

are compelled to engage their imagination regarding the figure's inner state, motivations, and the very essence of what the Luohan represents<sup>[9]</sup>.

The concentrated figure composition deliberately strips away narrative redundancy and contextual clues. It creates a vacuum of literal meaning. This vacuum compels the viewer to turn inward, towards the core subject, and towards their own resources for interpretation. Simultaneously, the extreme visual mass and detail of the individual figure, inherent in this compositional choice, generate a palpable sense of oppressive presence. The sensory impact of this “oppression” or overwhelming immediacy can momentarily dismantle the viewer's rational, analytical faculties, triggering a more primal, intuitive response – often akin to religious awe or the sublime. This emotional or spiritual shock, in turn, becomes the primary catalyst for personalized interpretation and the filling of the “spiritual blankness.” As seen in the reception history of the “Sixteen Luohan,” devotees perceive compassion in the intense gaze, literati grasp elusive Zen enlightenment ( 禅机 ) in the contorted posture, and emperors sense majestic dignity ( 威仪 ) in the monumental form. The composition forces the encounter; “spiritual blankness” opens the infinite possibilities within it.

#### 4.2. The Enrichment and Sublimation of Composition by “Spiritual Blankness”

While the composition provides the structure, “spiritual blankness” is the vital force that counteracts the potential pitfalls of such radical singularity. Without it, the concentrated composition, despite its power, risks evoking feelings of boring, or even monotony across a series of sixteen similar works. Even Guan Xiu's masterful depiction might struggle to sustain interest solely through formal virtuosity on such a constrained theme. The emergence of “spiritual blankness,” however, fundamentally transforms this potential limitation. It acts, transmuting the physical “fullness” ( 实 ) and potential visual heaviness of the crowded composition into a luminous spiritual “emptiness” ( 虚 ) and conceptual .The finite composition presented visually unfolds dynamically into an infinite psychological and spiritual dimension within the viewer's mind. The compositional elements – the meticulously rendered figure, the sparse background, the minimal props – transcend their literal functions. Through the viewer's associative imagination, triggered and shaped by the “blankness,” they become potent points of contact for religious metaphors, personal reflections, and philosophical inquiries. The rock is no longer just a seat; it becomes the immovable foundation of enlightenment. The Luohan's gaze is no longer just lines on silk; it becomes a challenge, or a window to the infinite<sup>[10]</sup>. Composition is thus enriched and deepened not by adding more visual elements, but by the proliferation of symbolic meaning and personal resonance generated through “spiritual blankness.” openness.

Moreover, “spiritual blankness” elevates the artistic realm of the composition, imbuing the work with significantly higher aesthetic and spiritual value. The profound artistic conception it fosters triggers boundless reverie and subjective engagement in the viewer. The static composition gives rise to a dynamic, living field of spiritual communication between the subject and the object. Consequently, when appreciating the work, the viewer does not merely linger on the pictorial surface, admiring technique or form. They are drawn to penetrate its spiritual core, engaging with the philosophical and religious connotations it embodies through their own unique understanding and emotional response<sup>[11]</sup>. This communion of minds, facilitated by the “blankness,” transforms every line, every contour within the pictorial space into something dynamic and fluid in the viewer's perception. The pictorial elements shift from being merely physically dense to possessing a potent spiritual potential energy, waiting to be activated by the viewer's engagement. The composition thus transcends mere “formal fullness” and ascends to the state of “resonant vitality”, where the spirit moves and resonates between artwork and beholder.

In the Imperial Household Agency version of the “Sixteen Luohan,” “spiritual blankness” is the key that unlocks the composition's deeper power. It liberates Guan Xiu's compositionally “full,” even crowded, forms from their material constraints, reconstructing them within the viewer's mind as a flowing, boundless universe of Zen ( 禅 ) meaning. This powerfully demonstrates the profound Daoist and Chan principle of unity of opposites: how extreme “fullness” ( 实 ) can achieve extreme “emptiness” ( 虚 ). It offers, in essence, a brilliant and reverse interpretation of the classic compositional principle “planning the black as if it were white” ( 计黑当白 ) – here, the intense planning and saturation of the “black” creates the experiential “white” (the spiritual space for the viewer).<sup>[12]</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

Regarding composition, the Imperial Household Agency version of the “Sixteen Luohan” exhibits unique artistic allure. Its concentrated figure composition breaks away from the mainstream narrative-driven approach of figure painting. The distribution of figures and backgrounds is rational and dynamic. As the pictorial subject, the Luohan figures are skillfully positioned centrally to dominate the scene, forming a powerfully impactful compositional structure. The background elements are diverse, not only completing the Luohan’s image but also enriching the picture through contrasts in texture, further accentuating the Luohan’s primacy. In terms of “spiritual blankness,” the work attains an equally high artistic realm. The manifestation of “spiritual blankness” is distinctive: the saturated compositional design of the figures and the potent expressiveness in their portrayal—achieved through details like facial expressions and postures—provoke profound viewer contemplation and reverie. Composition and “spiritual blankness” are intrinsically linked. Composition provides the spatial foundation for “spiritual blankness,” guiding the viewer’s attention towards its potential and facilitating its expression. “Spiritual blankness,” in turn, shatters the potential monotony of the composition and sublimates its artistic conception. The two elements are mutually reinforcing, jointly contributing to the work’s unique artistic charm and profound cultural significance.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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