REVISITING DUNHUANG: FIVE-W ART JOURNEY TO MOGAO CAVES

Leon K. L. Chew

Zayed University, United Arab Emirates

Mogao Caves, collectively known as one of the five groups of cave shrines found in the Greater Dunhuang, were created between the 4th and 14th centuries. Among the 735 caves dug out of the cliff, the 492 caves in the south contain a collection of 45,000 square meters of murals, more than 2000 painted Buddhist statues and sculptures, and some 50,000 Buddhist scriptures and other relics. Between 1906 and 1919, many archaeologists and explorers of Central Asia visited the caves. The caves were opened to the public in 1979, and I first visited the caves in 2006. Two years later, I became a Chinese Art scholar in the Gulf. Fueled by my experience from the trip to the Mogao Caves, I injected a new dimension into the Middle East curriculum, introducing a new medium of artistic practice and a new paradigm of esthetic research. Using the Mogao Caves as a springboard, I introduced the Five-W approach to study artwork. This paper offers a relook, using this approach, at the Mogao Caves based on some of my research findings.

Keywords: Art, Buddha, Cave, Dunhuang, Mogao.

Introduction

The name Dunhuang, with the Chinese characters ‘dun’ meaning ‘large’, and ‘huang’ meaning ‘glorious’, seems to call to mind an imagination of extravagant treasures lying within the sand dunes in the desert.

In the greater Dunhuang area, there are five groups of cave shrines collectively known as Dunhuang Grottoes. These five groups are: Mogao Caves, the Western Caves of the Thousand Buddhas, Yulin Caves, the Eastern Caves of the Thousand Buddhas, and the Five Temple Caves. Among these, the most magnificent are the Mogao Caves, which have been recognized as a world cultural heritage.

Mogao Caves

Since 1979, millions of visitors from among international scholars, art specialists, and state leaders of China and foreign countries have been attracted to the Mogao Caves, the most significant archaeological find of China.

Strikingly good condition in which they have been preserved, the Mogao Caves are a treasure trove of both the Chinese art and Buddhist art. Outstanding because of their colossal scale, the honeycomb of caves stretches 1,680 meters north to south. Altogether 735 caves were dug out of the cliff with a height rising from 15 to 30 meters distributed on four different levels. The 243 caves in the northern area were living quarters that were also used for religious practice.
by the monks. The remaining caves in the south stretching for about 1,600 meters contain a collection of 45,000 square meters of murals, more than 2000 painted Buddhist statues and sculptures, and some 50,000 Buddhist scriptures and other relics that were first discovered and stunned the world in the early 1900s.

**Art Journey**

I first visited the Mogao Caves in 2006. Two years later, I took up the challenge of teaching and doing research in the Gulf. Having worked with a wide spectrum of tertiary students in countries including Singapore, China, and UK for more than three decades, and fueled by my experience from the trip to the Mogao Caves, I have managed to inject a new dimension into the Middle East curriculum, with an objective of introducing a new medium of artistic practice, and a new paradigm of esthetic research.

The first new course I have introduced to the Emirati female students at the Zayed University in UAE is Chinese Painting. Through the redesigned Art History course, I have also taken the students to the East, beginning by a visual journey to the Mogao Caves, as a start to explore architectures, murals, paintings, prints, textiles, ceramics, and sculptures. Both the courses always stir up tremendous interest, and have been over subscribed every time they are offered. The main motivation for the students is not just their excitement at the opportunity to explore new artistic territory, but to investigate new esthetic theory of Chinese philosophy and culture in general. I am impressed by the students’ sincere quest for new knowledge, and their keen enthusiasm in learning something out of their comfort domain.

Using the Mogao Caves as a springboard, I have introduced the Five-W approach to study artwork. The Five Ws are: 1) Who – Artist, Patron, and Collector; 2) What – Medium and Content; 3) Where – Origin; 4) When – Chronology; and 5) How – Style, Formal Elements, and Principles of Design. Using this approach, this paper offers a relook at the Mogao Caves, Cave 249 in particular, based on some of my research findings.

**Five-W Approach**

1. **Who**

A monk named Lezun founded the Mogao Caves in A.D. 366. It is believed that one of his disciples, Zhiqin, had an unusual meditative experience there. He then hollowed out the first of the caves and expressed his experience visually. The site gradually grew with a community of monks forming there over the centuries. While patrons including the Chinese emperors and foreign dignitaries sponsored the construction of some major caves, Buddhist devotees and merchants may have funded many other caves. The highly decorated caves initially served as a place of meditation for monks, but later developed to serve the monasteries, and finally became a place of public pilgrimage. After the Tang Dynasty, however, the site went into a gradual decline, and the caves were largely abandoned and covered by sand.

In 1900, a Taoist priest called Wang Yuanlu accidentally stumbled upon the caves. Astounded, he hired a man named Yang to transcribe the writings found on the murals. At that time, Chinese officials took little interest in the Dunhuang treasures. Between 1906 and 1919, much of the hand-copied ancient books, manuscripts, literary works, and Buddhist and secular decorative artworks were removed by Aurel Stein, Paul Pelliot, Sergei Oldenburg, Langdon Warner, Kozui Otani, Albert von Le Coq, and others.
2 What
Although Buddhist cave art originated in India, it became quite different by the time it reached Dunhuang. Dunhuang cave art is in fact a combination of the Dunhuang artistic tradition of the Han and Jin Dynasties, the imported styles of the Southern and Northern Dynasties, Tang and Song styles from Central China, and the foreign artistic traditions of India, Central Asia, and Western Asia.

The art of Mogao Caves is a comprehensive art, which combines architecture, sculpture, and painting. Since the caves were dug out of sandstone, painted clay stucco sculptures and murals became the typical media of artistic expression. Although changes in Buddhist thought at different stages did influence the selection of themes for the overall sculptural layout and the murals, it is still possible to put together a complete and unified picture of most of the caves. Typically the main focus of Buddhist practise, the painted sculpture is usually placed in a wall niche or on an altar in a cave. This is matched harmoniously with the surrounding murals that generally depict complex narratives or detailed decorative visual statement.

3 Where
About halfway between New Delhi and Beijing, Dunhuang is an oasis town situated in the Gobi desert. It held a strategic position on the trade route between the East and the West over the Silk Road. The group of Mogao Caves is the most magnificent one of the five groups of cave shrines found in the Greater Dunhuang.

4 When
Founded in A.D. 366, the Mogao Caves were constructed with continuous production of Buddhist images in the forms including murals and sculptures from the fourth to the fourteenth centuries. Rediscovered in 1900, many archaeologists and explorers of Central Asia visited the caves between 1906 and 1919. The caves were later re-opened to the public in 1979.

5 How

**Cave 249 (Is it a bird? Is it a plane? Is it superman?)**

Cave 249 is a typical example of a cave constructed in the Early Period (during Western Wei Dynasty). During this period, the theme and style of Dunhuang cave art show a strong influence of the Buddhist art of India with the cultural roots of Central China. Shades of Indian Buddhism can be seen especially from the clothing of the Buddha in different postures and settings found in the middle part of the walls.

While the centre of the ceiling is painted with large lotuses, heavenly dancers and musicians surround the upper borders of the four walls. The introduction of traditional Chinese mythological themes has created in the murals a dynamic portrayal of flying figures and floating clouds. An example of the flying figures is the apsaras, a highlight of Cave 249.

The image below shows two flying musician and dancer apsaras who wear Indian styled coronets and long skirts, with ribbons over their shoulders.
As mentioned earlier, the periodic theme and representational style show a strong amalgamation of the Buddhist art of India and the cultural roots of China, resulting in images that are exaggerated in terms of bodily proportion.

The wire-like lines outlining the various shapes give rise to an expression of vigor and freedom. Attention is given to the balance of the main and secondary lines, sparse and dense lines, thick and thin lines, giving a sense of linear rhythm.

The warm ocher background was gradually replaced by colors that create a contrast to the elegant mixing of painterly vermilion, purple, blue, and shades of green. Two red patches painted on the cheeks of the apsarasas illustrate vitality. Such technique of dazzling coloring and rich visual textures gives the picture a three-dimensional effect.

A general feature of this decorative composition is its fullness, leaving no surface unpainted. The main emphasis of the composition is the two prominent apsarasas, while the rest of the subordinating elements filled the space according to the rules of balance, though asymmetrical, neatness and unity in variety, creating a three-dimensional artistic structure with rhythmic charm and beauty in motion.

Conclusion

The Southern Mogao Caves can be categorised into three periods, namely the Early Period (Sixteen Kingdoms A.D. 366-439, Northern Wei A.D. 440-534, Western Wei A.D. 535-556, and Northern Zhou A.D. 557-580), the Middle Period (Sui A.D. 581-618, Early Tang A.D. 618-704, High Tang A.D. 705-780, Middle Tang A.D. 781-847, and Late Tang A.D. 848-906), and the Late Period (Five Dynasties A.D. 907-960, Song A.D. 960-1035, Western Xia A.D. 1036-1226, and Yuan A.D. 1227-1368).

This paper discussed Cave 249 of the Early Period (Western Wei). Although it may not be impossible in future to look at all the caves, it’s hoped that the paper would inspire a focus to use...
the same approach to first look at nine other representative caves constructed over the Middle Period and the Late Period. In my opinion, giving them interesting names like the one I gave to Cave 249, these caves are:

- Cave 427 (Middle/Sui): Do Re Mi;
- Cave 57 (Middle/Early Tang): The “Beauty” . . . ;
- Cave 96 (Middle/Early Tang): . . . and the “Beast”;
- Caves 148 (Middle/High Tang) and 158 (Middle/Middle Tang): “Snow White” and the “Seven Dwarfs”;
- Caves 16 and 17 (Middle/Late Tang): The Lost Sutras;
- Cave 61 (Late/Five Dynasties): Exotic Landscape; and
- Cave 465 (Late/Yuan): The Secret Cave.

References