

DUNHUANG

Buddhist Art at the Gateway of the Silk Road

[Introduction in Foyer]

Dunhuang, an oasis town strategically located in western Gansu province, was once an important hub of east-west trade and China's gateway to the Silk Road. Established as a Chinese garrison in 111 BCE, it became a transit point for caravans of luxury goods, fine Central Asian horses, diplomatic missions, monks going east to spread the Buddhist doctrine, and pilgrims going west to bring back Buddhist scriptures. Over the course of time political control of the area would shift, and events elsewhere would bring different peoples to settle here. The religions, cultures, and intellectual ideas of several different civilizations met, mixed, and left their traces in Dunhuang's sacred cave shrines.

The largest and most important of these cave shrines is the Mogao Grottoes, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Its 735 caves are cut into a cliff located just 25 kilometers southeast of the oasis town. Cave construction began here in 366 CE and continued for another thousand years. The 492 caves presently preserved in the southern section houses more than 2,000 painted sculptures, more than 45,000 square meters of murals, and the remains of wooden architecture. These works of art are major masterpieces

of Buddhist art and provide an important resource for studying not only the evolution of artistic styles but also the religious practices, social history, and culture of the widely diverse ethnic groups in the region. In addition, the tens of thousands of manuscripts and relics hidden in the Library Cave, discovered in 1900, are considered a virtual “encyclopedia of the medieval period” in ancient China and Central Asia.

The Dunhuang caves and their contents, preserved until this day by their isolation and the dry climate of the Gobi Desert, are very fragile. Consequently, tourist access to this site is highly regulated, and the Dunhuang Academy has been developing various methods of exhibition that would safeguard and preserve its treasures. This exhibition combines replicas created by the Academy and authentic relics to re-create the experience of visiting two of the Mogao Grottoes’ important shrines—the sixth-century Cave 432 in one gallery and the eighth-century Cave 45 in another.

[South Gallery]

第432窟平面图

MOGAO CAVE 432

Central pillar

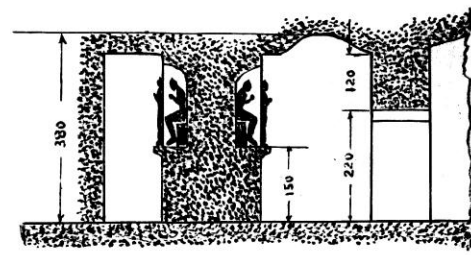
Mogao Cave 432, Western
Wei dynasty (535–556)

Replica in paint and
fiberglass by Du Yongwei
and Zhang Li, 2008

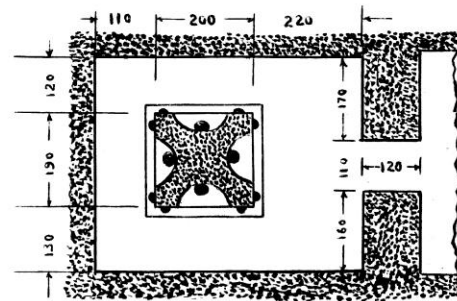
The central stupa-pillar
cave type is a distinctive
cave plan used from the
sixth to early seventh
century at Dunhuang.

It features a large four-sided pillar on the central axis of the chamber. This pillar probably served the same function as the ancient stupa (an Indian mortuary monument) in the religious ritual of circumambulation. The faithful would walk around a sacred monument in a clockwise direction as an act of veneration or as part of the practice of meditation or chanting.

In Cave 432, the images on the pillar would have served as a focus for meditation. Each side houses a seated Buddha in a niche, flanked by two or four bodhisattvas. A host of small painted clay bodhisattva and Buddha images decorate the top of the pillar. Typical of the



側剖面



Section and floor plan of drawing
of Cave 432

Western Wei period, the Buddha wears a Chinese-style robe and is sculpted with a Chinese sense of delicacy and linear elegance.

THE LIBRARY CAVE

The Library Cave, originally built in the Tang dynasty as a memorial chapel, became a storehouse for manuscripts, printed texts, paintings, textiles, and other artifacts. In the eleventh century, the chamber was walled up and its entrance hidden under a mural. This trove of more than 50,000 manuscripts and other cultural treasures came to light again in 1900 with its discovery by a resident Daoist priest.

While the greater portion of these treasures were taken out of the country by foreign explorers and dispersed to institutions in different countries, a significant number can be found in the National Library of China in Beijing, Dunhuang Museum, Dunhuang Academy, and other Chinese museums. Recent archaeological investigations of the northern section of the Mogao Grottoes have uncovered additional fragments of sutras and other documents written in diverse languages.

Ninety percent of the finds at the Library Cave relate to religions that were important in the region: Buddhism, Daoism, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, Nestorianism, etc. The rest cover a wide range of secular topics. Many of these finds provide earlier versions of known classics. The secular documents illuminate the diverse cultures of the region, and

provide information on the social and economic life of its people.

[East Showcase]

九色鹿本生故事

Deer King Jataka

Mogao Cave 257, Northern Wei dynasty (386–534)

Replica in mineral pigments on paper by Chang Shuhong, 1955

This is the earliest use of a horizontal, multi-scene narrative painting at Dunhuang. Two-thirds of the painting illustrates the *Deer King Jataka*, one of a series of tales about the Buddha in his previous incarnations. Here, he is a beautiful golden deer. The story moves chronologically from opposite ends of the composition and climaxes in the middle. Another tale, Lady Sumati invoking the Buddha, is told in the right section of the mural.

[From Left to Right]

1. The Deer King rescues a drowning man. In the next scene, the rescued man vows to keep the deer's existence a secret.

2. At the climax of the story, the Deer King reveals his identity to the king and tells of the rescued man's betrayal.

3. The local king and his entourage seek the deer.
4. In their palace, the local queen dreams of a golden deer and the king offers a reward for its capture. The rescued man claims the reward.
5. In the *Story of Lady Sumati*, a distraught bride (in the tower) invokes the Buddha to appear before her non-believer father-in-law and wedding guests in the room at the right.
6. A host of bodhisattvas and disciples arrive with Shakyamuni Buddha, who converts the guests.

佛經寫本：《大般涅槃經》

Handwritten Buddhist scripture:

Mahaparinirvana Sutra

Northern Dynasties (386–581)

Ink on paper

Collection of the Dunhuang Academy, D.0227

The text is a transcription of “On the Nature of Tathagata,” chapter 12 of the *Nirvana Sutra* (or *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*), which was translated from Sanskrit into Chinese by Dharmakṣema (385–433). A very important sutra in Mahayana Buddhism, its main teachings center on the eternity of the Buddha, the meaning of nirvana, and the presence of the Buddha

Nature in all beings. It also provides the theoretical basis for the precept of abstention from meat.

佛經寫本：《妙法蓮華經》

**Handwritten Buddhist scripture: *Lotus Sutra*
Northern Dynasties (386–581)**

Ink on paper

Collection of the Dunhuang Academy, D.0648

Buddhists believe that copying a sutra has great merit and is also a way of meditation. This fragment from the *Lotus Sutra* (short for the “Lotus of the Wonderful Law”) transcribes the Parable of the Conjured City. The *Lotus Sutra* is a very important Mahayanist scripture which uses an abundance of metaphors to introduce metaphysical concepts and promotes various kinds of religious practices which would lead to the one path of enlightenment.

佛經寫本：《佛說大藥善巧方便經》卷上

**Handwritten Buddhist scripture:
Mahabhaisajya Upayakaushalya Sutra
Tang dynasty (618–907)**

Ink on paper

Collection of the Dunhuang Academy, D.0704

This fragment comes from volume one of a sutra that had not been known until this fragment was discovered in Dunhuang. Unfortunately, the other volume(s) have not been found. The transcription in this fragment contains two stories about a wise man called Mahabhaisajya (literally, "Great Medicine") who solved a criminal case and saved a man's life using deductive reasoning techniques.

《归义军衙府酒破历》

Wine Transaction Journal

Northern Song dynasty, 964

Ink on paper

Collection of the Dunhuang Academy, D.0038 & D.0784

The journal had been torn into three pieces. Part of a rectangular seal translated as "newly cast seal of the Guiyi [Insurrection] Army and Commissioner [of the Hexi area]," matches these fragments with the segment now in France. This document records the wine purchases made between April 9 and October 16, 964, by the military government. Among the 213 recorded purchases, 34 were for various Uighur and Khotanese envoys, illuminating the diplomatic activities of the local government.

《番汉合时掌中珠》

Tangut-Chinese Bilingual Dictionary
Western Xia dynasty (1038–1227)

Ink on paper

Collection of the Dunhuang Academy, B184:9

This woodcut-printed document, excavated from Cave B184 in the Northern Area, is page 14 in the *Tangut-Chinese Bilingual Dictionary*. It is the only complete page of this dictionary extant in China, so it is valuable even though fragmentary. The displayed text belongs mainly to the category “Land Use” (the third and last chapter of the section on Earth).

藏文残数学文书

**Fragment of a document on mathematics written
in Tibetan**

Yuan dynasty (1271–1368)

Ink on paper

Collection of the Dunhuang Academy, B59:10

This document, written in a cursive Tibetan script, comes from Cave B59 in the Northern Area of the Mogao Grottoes and is rare among Dunhuang finds. The text on the front side of this fragment contains pithy multiplication formulae (such as, “three times one, one times three equals three” and “two times four, four times two equals eight”) regarded as an innovative

improvement for the time. On the document's reverse are some Tibetan words expressing numbers, as well as Tibetan-style and abbreviated numerals.

[West Showcase]

天宫伎乐图

Celestial Music

Mogao Cave 288, Western Wei dynasty (535–556)

Replica in mineral pigments on paper by Shi Weixiang, 1974

This music performance represents a type of offering made by celestial deities to the Buddha. The lively yet elegant movements of the figures are deeply imbued with the style of Indian and Central Asian dance. Such scenes are usually depicted in the upper areas of a cave, symbolically denoting its performance in heaven. The painting dates to the same period as the stupa-pillar from Cave 432, re-created in this gallery, and a similar painting could well have been in the original cave before its murals were painted over.

THE ART OF CLAY FIGURES

Like the larger sculpture at Dunhuang, these smaller figures were formed with a mixture of clay, fine sand, and wheat straw. After painting, the molded figures of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and *apsaras*, as well as lotus flowers, were adhered by their flat backs to the walls, for instance, on the central stupa-pillar in this gallery. There they served as an adoring host, setting off the more fully rounded figures within the niche. The large figures have a wooden armature padded with wheat straw.

举莲菩萨像

Bodhisattva holding aloft a lotus
Northern Wei dynasty (386–534)

Painted clay stucco

Collection of the Dunhuang Academy, Z.0718

持花菩萨像

Bodhisattva holding up a lotus
Northern Wei dynasty (386–534)

Painted clay stucco

Collection of the Dunhuang Academy, Z.0679

立姿菩萨像

Standing bodhisattva

Northern Wei dynasty (386–534)

Painted clay stucco

Collection of the Dunhuang Academy, Z.0688

跪姿双手合十菩萨像

Kneeling bodhisattva with palms pressed together

Northern Wei dynasty (386–534)

Painted clay stucco

Collection of the Dunhuang Academy, Z.0680

佛像

Buddha

Northern Wei dynasty (386–534)

Painted clay stucco

Collection of the Dunhuang Academy, Z.0702

TRACES OF DUNHUANG'S EAST-WEST COMMERCE AND ETHNIC DIVERSITY

Silk Road commerce and periods of foreign occupation brought together the culture and religions of diverse groups of people. The region had been governed at different times by the Xiongnu, Turkic Tuoba, Tibetans, Uighurs, Tangut Xixia, and Mongols as well as by the Chinese. Consequently, the ethnic dress of the changing ruling elite would be reflected in donor portraits as well as the costumes of the deities in both paintings and sculpture. A large quantity of fragmentary texts in non-Han languages and a number of Persian and Xixia coins were found in the northern section of the Mogao Grottoes, a private area where the monks lived and practiced their religion. The carved wood mortuary figure of a Westerner (no. 27) attests not only to the multi-ethnic nature of the local community but also to the use of some of the caves in this section of the site for funerals and burials.

男胡俑

Mortuary figure of male Westerner Tang dynasty (618–907)

Wood and pigments

Collection of the Dunhuang Academy, B86:11

This partially damaged mortuary figure wears a pointed hat and has deep-set eyes, a chiseled nose, a wide mouth, and a protruding chin. Most of the original pigments have come off, leaving only a minute amount of white pigment in places.

立佛像

Standing Buddha

Tang dynasty (618–907)

Painted clay stucco

Collection of the Dunhuang Academy, B142:2

波斯银币

Persian coin

Sassanian, reign of Peroz I (457–484)

Silver

Collection of the Dunhuang Academy, B222:1

This Sassanid Persian coin was issued during the reign of King Peroz I (r. 457–484). On one side is a very worn bust portrait of the king in profile. The other side carries the image of a pillar-like fire altar flanked by two attendants dressed in kingly garb. The state religion of the Sassanid dynasty was Zoroastrianism, and the king was considered guardian of the sacred fire.

DECORATIVE FLOOR TILES

Patterned floor tiles were found inside the caves or in the wooden temple structures built as antechambers to the shrines. The main decorative pattern for the floor tiles was the eight-petaled lotus combined with such motifs as vines, scrolls, heart shapes, flames, and precious beads. There were also animal designs like horses, lions, and camels.

石榴纹砖

**Floor tile with pomegranate design
Tang dynasty (618–907)**

Clay

Collection of the Dunhuang Academy, Z.0069

如意卷草纹砖

**Floor tile with *ruyi* and scrolling vines
Tang dynasty (618–907)**

Clay

Collection of the Dunhuang Academy, Z.1363

莲花联珠纹砖

Floor tile with lotus flower and linked-pearl design

Tang dynasty (618–907)

Clay

Collection of the Dunhuang Academy, Z.1197

桃心十一卷瓣莲花纹砖

Floor tile with eleven-petaled lotus

Tang dynasty (618–907)

Clay

Collection of the Dunhuang Academy, Z.1134

[North Gallery]

莫高窟盛唐第45窟

MOGAO CAVE 45

High Tang period (705–781)

This cave is an outstanding example of the Golden Age of Buddhist art at Dunhuang. An assembly-hall-style space, it is designed for larger gatherings of worshippers. Its canopy-like ceiling, decorated with the Thousand Buddhas and a floral medallion in the central *zaojing*, symbolizes heaven.

clockwise from entrance:

SOUTH WALL

观音经变图

Avalokiteshvara Narrative (Guanyin jingbian)

Replica in mineral pigments on paper by Zhao Junrong and Wang Hong'en, 2004

The various perils of the age are depicted in small scenes on either side of a large figure of Avalokiteshvara (Guanyin), the bodhisattva who hears and rescues those in distress who call upon his name. His many manifestations as savior are described in the *Lotus Sutra*.

WEST WALL

NICHE

主龕塑像

Buddhist septad

Replica sculptures in paint and fiberglass by Zhang Li and Li Lin, 2004

The focal point of the cave is a sculptural niche carved into the rear wall. The Buddhist septad in the niche consists of Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha; two of his disciples, the youthful Ananda and the older careworn Mahakashyapa; a pair of bodhisattvas; and a pair of ferocious guardians. Characteristic of the high Tang sculptural style, the Buddha is robustly modeled with softly draped, clinging robes. The fleshy bodhisattvas appear more human and this-worldly than ever before. The same vigorously modeled figure style is seen in the murals of the cave.

NICHE CEILING MURAL

釋迦多寶并座說法圖說

Meeting of the two Buddhas

Replica in mineral pigments on paper by Guan Jingwen, 2004

According to the *Lotus Sutra*, a stupa containing Prabhutaratna, a Buddha of the past, miraculously

appeared in the sky when Shakyamuni preached the Dharma on Vulture Peak. Shakyamuni sat next to Prabhutaratna in his stupa and continued his sermon.

SOUTH FLANK, NICHE WALL, AND NORTH FLANK MURALS

Replica in mineral pigments on paper by Niu Yusheng, Shao Hong, Hou Liming, 2004

Flanking the niche, there is a bodhisattva on each side wall.

NORTH WALL

极乐世界（西方净土变）

Sukhavati (Amitabha's Pure Land)

Replica in mineral pigments on paper by Wu Rongjian, Ma Yuhua, and Shen Shuping, 2004

The Amitabha Buddha sits in the Western Pure Land, a paradise filled with celestial music, palaces, and jeweled trees. Here, the faithful who call upon his name will be reborn from lotus buds. The narrative panels on either side tell the story of Queen Vaidehi, her sufferings and eventual salvation through meditation.

EAST WALL

The bodhisattva and Ananda from the East Wall of the original cave are reproduced on either side of the corridor entrance to this room.

Banners

Beginning in the Tang dynasty (618–907), banners were used as a kind of offering by worshippers. They were hung beside the Buddha image in temples or cave shrines. According to Buddhist scriptures, for instance, one should offer a seven-tiered lamp and raise colorful banners in the worship of the Seven Medicine Buddhas. This ritual would rid the worshipper of bad luck, danger, or disease. In the murals at Dunhuang, they are seen held by immortals, *apsaras*, or courtly attendants. Scenes of lighting lamps and raising banners are found in murals depicting the Medicine Buddhas.

缀花绢幡

Banner with floral appliqués

Tang dynasty (618–907)

Silk; 78 x 9.5 cm

Collection of the Dunhuang Academy, Z.0002

许愿幡

Prayer banner

Tang dynasty, 725

Silk

Collection of the Dunhuang Academy, Z.0003

The purpose of this banner as an offering is stated in an inscription on its first panel:

“On the 14th day of the 7th month in the 13th year of the Kaiyuan period [725], I, Upasika [female lay Buddhist] Kang [originally from Central Asia], am offering a banner because of my eye disease. If I recover, I will offer one more to thank Buddha for his compassion.”

[Foyer]

[Left Case]

1号

- | | |
|--------|-------------------------------|
| 1) 岩黄 | <i>Hedysarum</i> (Sweetvetch) |
| 2) 小豆茶 | Bean green |
| 3) 特石绿 | Fine Emerald |
| 4) 咖啡色 | Coffee brown |

2号

- | | |
|---------|-------------------------------|
| 1) 石青 | Azurite |
| 2) 玉绿 | Jade green |
| 3) 岩口黄肌 | <i>Astragalus</i> (Milkvetch) |
| 4) 朱红 | Vermilion |

3号

- | | |
|--------|-------------------|
| 1) 橄榄绿 | Olive green |
| 2) 朱砂 | Cinnabar |
| 3) 蛤粉 | Clam shell powder |
| 4) 石绿 | Emerald |

4号

- | | |
|-------|----------------|
| 1) 铁红 | Iron oxide red |
| 2) 雌黄 | Orpiment |

- | | |
|-------|---------------------|
| 3)孔雀绿 | Peacock green |
| 4)瓦岗红 | <i>Wa gang hong</i> |

5号

- | | |
|------|-------------|
| 1)松绿 | Pine green |
| 2)辰砂 | Cinnabar |
| 3)褐色 | Brown |
| 4)佛青 | Ultramarine |

6号

- | | |
|-------|----------------|
| 1)红珊瑚 | Red coral |
| 2)黑 | Black |
| 3)钴蓝 | Cobalt blue |
| 4)褐黑 | Brownish black |

7号

- | | |
|--------------|-----------------|
| 1)鱼皮胶 (三千本) | Fish Skin Glue |
| 2)明胶 | Gelatin |
| 3)皂角 | Gleditsia |
| 4)梔子 | Gardenia |
| 5)核桃皮 | Walnut shell |
| 6)板蓝根 | Indigowoad Root |
| 7)茜草 | Madder |

Simple clay or pottery utilitarian objects have been found in the caves of both the public Southern Area and the more private Northern Area of the Mogao Grottoes, which served as living quarters, meditation cells, and burial chambers for the monks. Among the finds of mundane pottery are the color-mixing bowls used by the monk-artisans and the oil lamps used to illuminate the caves where they lived, worshipped, or worked.

油灯台

Oil lamp

Five Dynasties (907–960)

Clay

Collection of the Dunhuang Academy, Z.0876-3

油灯碗

Oil lamp

Five Dynasties (907–960)

Clay

Collection of the Dunhuang Academy, Z.0832

调色碗

Color-mixing bowl

Tang dynasty (618–907)

Pottery

Collection of the Dunhuang Academy, Z.1408

调色碗

Color-mixing bowl

Tang dynasty (618–907)

Pottery

Collection of the Dunhuang Academy, Z.1407

调色碗

Color-mixing bowl

Tang dynasty (618–907)

Pottery

Collection of the Dunhuang Academy, Z.0900

[Right Case]

HOW THE MURALS AT THE MOGAO GROTTOES WERE MADE

1. First the plaster ground is applied to the rough sandstone wall in successive layers of finer and finer composition:
 - a. Coarse mud layer, often several inches thick, made from local sandy earth mixed with straw and water
 - b. Fine mud layer made from local washed clay mixed with fibers and water
 - c. Powder layer, that is, a thin, smooth layer of powdered kaolin—a fine white clay used in manufacture of porcelain—lime, or gypsum mixed with water.
2. An overall design of the cave murals is made.
3. Different methods are used to create or transfer an underdrawing: a freehand sketch with brush and red pigment, a design transfer using a grid, or by stencil and pounce.
4. Colors are applied. Often the underdrawing was marked with color labels by masters and then filled in with mineral pigments by students.
5. Final touch-up lines are applied to define the shapes.