

Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies

ISSN 1710-8268

<http://journals.sfu.ca/cjbs/index.php/cjbs/index>

Number 11, 2016

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A Luncheon Preview of “Cave Temples of
Dunhuang: Buddhist Arts on China’s Silk Road”
Exhibition
(May 7th-September 4th, 2016)

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Buddhist arts enthusiasts, scholars and local press gathered at Fairmont Pacific Rim Hotel in downtown Vancouver on February 16th, 2016 for a special presentation of the upcoming exhibition “Cave of Temples Dunhuang: Buddhist Arts of the Silk Road.”

Notable attendants were Tim Whalen, Director of the Getty Conservation Institute; Marcia Reed, Chief Curator of the Getty Research Institute; Mimi Gardner Gates, Chairman of the Dunhuang Foundation and Robert H. N. Ho, Founder of The Robert H.N. Ho Family Foundation – the exhibition’s presenting sponsor.

Mogao Grottoes: A Place of Refuge, Pilgrimage and Sacred Inspiration

The focus of the exhibition and the luncheon was the Mogao Grottoes cave temple complex. Located on the edge of the Gobi Desert, about 1,150 miles west of Beijing, the site is on the UNESCO Heritage list and a popular tourist destination in China.

It is essential to understand the site as “a place of refuge, pilgrimage and sacred inspiration,” said Tim Whalen, Director of the Getty Conservation Institute, in his opening remark at the luncheon.

The Mogao Grottoes complex was a Buddhist center from the fourth to the fourteenth century, containing hundreds of decorated Buddhist temples, which were created under sponsorship of Buddhist monks, local officials, and wealthy families who wished to build karmic merit and perform acts of veneration.

Dunhuang’s cave temples also represent a thousand-year period of artistic and cultural production with more than forty-five thousand square meters of cave-wall paintings depicting Buddhist sutras, portraits of cave donors, and intricate and ornamental designs along with roughly two thousand painted sculptures.

As Whalen remarked, the site was the largest single body of Buddhist pictorial art in one place and the largest and most complete medieval site in China.

A Two-Decade Conservation Undertaking

The Getty Conservation Institute in the United States has partnered with the Dunhuang Academy in China to conduct a collaborative conservation project at the site since 1989, continued Whalen.

In 1997, the conservation effort shifted to preserving wall paintings in the cave temples of which a model project in the ninth-century Cave eighty-five was a highlight.

The fruit of the cross-border collaboration was a set of national guidelines for the conservation and management of Chinese heritage places titled “China Principle,” respecting and reflecting the country’s traditions and approaches to conservation, which has been applied at both Mogao and other sites.

The history of the conservation project at Dunhuang will be one of the central themes in the upcoming exhibition.

Cave Temples of Dunhuang Exhibition: Connecting the Silk Road to North America

Featuring three handmade cave replicas, forty-three devotional objects, and a virtual reproduction of paintings and sculptures in Cave 45, Mimi Gardner Gates explained that the exhibition aimed to present Buddhism and spirituality, medieval Chinese Buddhist art’s brilliance, and conservation efforts at Mogao Grottoes.

Replica Caves

Three full-scale, hand-painted replicas of Cave 275, 285 and 320 at the exhibition are part of the organizing team’s efforts to enrich the visitors’ experiences. Made entirely by the Dunhuang Academy’s artists, the replicas will allow visitors to learn more about cultural and religious hybridity and the high quality of medieval Buddhist art at Dunhuang.

Cave 275 was built in the fifth century and was one of the earliest caves in the complex. Its central attraction is a large sculpture of Maitreya, the Future Buddha, which is accentuated by intricate beaded jewel-

ry designs and textile patterns in the background. The sculpture and decorations reflect Central Asia's influence, particularly that of Western Asia.

Built a century later, Cave 285 is another excellent example of cultural and religious confluence at the site. Its ceiling is decorated with Chinese mythological beings while the wall on the right-hand side of the central Buddha is depicted with Hindu deities. The cave was also famous for its detailed paintings of celestial musicians, which are both vibrant in colour and dynamic in figure.

Visitors will be able to see a replica of Cave 320 at the exhibition, an eighth-century treasure whose ceiling is filled with rich patterning surrounded by a multitude of buddhas painted in stunning colors.

Cave replication, as noted by Gates, is not solely for the sake of creating authentic experiences for visitors but to demonstrate the character of Chinese Buddhist artistic practices. She said: "[R]eplication, copying was important to artistic training [and] accurate transmission and precision are essential in [...] Buddhist art."

Devotional Objects as Storytellers

The second major component of the exhibition will be a display of forty-three rarely seen artifacts dated variously to the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries, which were discovered at Mogao in 1900 in Cave 17, known as the "Library Cave."

Each carries with it a fascinating story, which has both entertainment and educational value. One of them is the earliest printed copy of the *Diamond Sutra* (868 CE) loaned from the British Library. Speaking of its origin, Marcial Reed said it was commissioned by a man named Wang Jie on behalf of his parents to seek merit for the whole family and to wish for enlightenment for others. The document was intended for universal

distribution. The sutra's title, continued Reed, reflects its enlightening capability as it can, like a diamond blade, cut through people's illusions and awaken them. The exhibition aims to convey such stories of the *Diamond Sutra*'s origin and its purpose to visitors.

Together, the artifacts tell a fascinating tale of religious transmission and artistic fusion at the site. Visitors will have a chance to see eighth-century paintings and embroidery, which detail Buddhist transmission, tenth-century art works which combine Chinese, Tibetan and local Dunhuang artistic traditions, and rare sketches providing a glimpse into the artistic creation process in the medieval period.

A Modern Lens on the Past

The exhibition will be the first one to use three-dimensional stereoscopic immersive technology, which will enable visitors to examine magnificent high Tang sculptures and paintings in Cave 45 in great detail. Reed said it was part of the team's continued effort to expose the general public to the cave temples' different media including its internal architecture, paintings, sculptures, textiles, embroideries, drawings, and printing.

Chinese Art Museum in Vancouver

Although the exhibition will be hosted at the Getty Center in Los Angeles, the Vancouver preview was an acknowledging sign of considerable local interest in Chinese Buddhist Art.

Mr. Robert H. N. Ho, in his concluding remark at the luncheon, attributed the decision not to host the exhibition in Vancouver to the lack of a local museum dedicated to Chinese art and culture that can accommodate its scope and scale.

Yet, a potential Vancouver Chinese Art and Culture Museum might not be far away as The Robert. H. N. Ho Family Foundation has co-founded China Global: The Vancouver Society for Promotion of Chinese Art and Culture, which aims to establish a permanent Chinese museum in the city.

The exhibition will run from May 7th to September 4th, 2016 at the Getty Center, Los Angeles.