

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Cave Temples of Dunhuang at The Getty

Allon Schoener · Wednesday, May 11th, 2016

Hardly a conventional art museum exhibition, Cave Temples of Dunhuang at The Getty offers a rich, multi-faceted experience incorporating three cave temple replicas, multimedia, 3D viewing and an interpretive exhibition consisting of documents and artifacts, some from The Getty's collection and others from major museums and libraries around the world.



The cave temples of Mogao are carved into a cliff facing the Daquan River. They blend into the dessert landscape. Photo: Sun Zhijun©Dunhuang Academy.



The nine-story temple, Cave 96, houses a colossal Tang dynasty statue of Buddha some thirty-three meters in height. ©Dunhuang Academy

On The Getty plaza, one is transported in space and time to the Dunhuang Mogao Grotto, a complex of Buddhist temple caves located along the epic Silk Road on the fringe of China's Gobi Desert. Dunhuang had been a major commercial hub and a center for Buddhist monks and missionaries. It was established as an outpost during the Han Dynasty in 111BC, with the first cave temples carved around 350 AD. By the seventh century, as Silk Road trade flourished, there were more than 1,000 caves decorated with magnificent statues and murals. It is said to be the world's largest site of medieval Buddhist art, with sculpture, paintings, and murals.

In his 1981 polemic, *Simulacres et Simulation*, the French post-modernist philosopher Jean Baudrillard stated that our contemporary society prefers replica to reality. Like the simulated on site reproduction of the Lascaux cave paintings, *Cave Temples of Dunhuang* offers a comparable off-site experience. Replicas of three caves generate a sense of reality equivalent to the experience one might have at the actual site. Unquestionably, it would be difficult for the thousands of people who will see this exhibition to actually visit this site in China.

The first component: Cave replicas



Cave 275, view of interior and sculpture of bodhisattva, Northern Liang Dynasty (420-429 CE) Mogao Caves, Dunhuang, China. Photo: Wu Jian, ©Dunhuang Academy



Cave 285, view of interior, Western Wei dynasty (535-556 CE), Mogao caves, Dunhuang, China. Photo: Wu Jian, ©Dunhuang Academy

Replicas of three caves from the Mogao Grotto have been recreated in three dimensional detail on The Getty plaza. A pedestrian temporary structure embossed with fractured cave painting details houses these cave replicas and offers no hint of the phenomenal experience awaiting inside. Phased traffic guarantees that no one spends an excessive amount of time in any one cave. Inside each cave replica one experiences an immersive simulation created by Dunhang Academy artisans. Painstakingly, they copied the actual murals on the walls of the caves; these replica fragments were transported and reassembled by artisans from the Dunhang Academy at the Getty site. Adding to the sought after sense of reality, there are sculptural figures of Buddha.

The second component: Cave contents



Tribute horse and camel, ca. late 800s CE, ink and pigments on paper. London, British Museum, 1919.0101.0.77 © The Trustees of The British Museum

One Mogao Grotto cave, called the “library cave,” was completely sealed until the beginning of the 20th century. It held tens of thousands of manuscripts, scrolls and paintings spanning dynasties. Its content related the history of people and politics while providing a panoramic view of Buddhist art. Discovered by a Daoist monk, he proceeded to sell the caves’ contents to Western European explorers. A number of these documents and artifacts, now in the possession of American, French and British archives, can be seen in an exhibition space at The Getty Research Institute.

For centuries, the legendary Silk Road was an historic commercial umbilical chord linking China to India, The Middle East and Europe. Although hardly the thesis of this exhibition, displaying some of the contents of the Library Cave confirms the fact that the world has always been cosmopolitan (an agglomeration of distinct ethnic groups) – whether it be the recruited armies of Alexander The Great or the inhabitants of Silk Road trading centers. Dating from the 5th to early 11th centuries, the varied manuscripts found in the Library Cave include a broad swath of cultural documents: works relating to history and mathematics as well as to folk songs and dance. There is a large number of religious documents, most of which are Buddhist. Other religions represented in this trove include: Daoism, Nestorian Christianity, Judaism and Manichaeism. The majority of the manuscripts are in Chinese; however, other languages including: Khotanese, Sanskrit, Sogdian, Tangut, Tibetan, Old Uyghur, Hebrew and Old Turkic are to be found there.

The third component: Multi-media and a 3D stereoscopic experience

Panoramic projected views of the Mogao Grotto site convey a sense of its isolation and dramatic landscape. In another space, visitors are provided with

3D glasses to experience stereoscopic images of Cave 45. This is described as “the first time that this particular 3D stereoscopic technology has been used in a museum exhibition.” It is similar to the 3D experience offered with some motion pictures which has failed to capture an audience.

This Cave Painting 3D experience is inferior to the type of immersive experience provided by virtual reality headsets available today. In the Cave Painting 3D experience, you are a detached observer. With a virtual reality headset, you are provided with the feeling of actually being in the space. Immersion and presence replace observation. When interrogated on this matter, one of the curators said that this option was considered and rejected. It would be interesting to know why?

The role of the Getty Conservation Institute

The cave temples at this site date from the fourth to fourteenth century. Although existing in an extremely dry climate, the original cave paintings have experienced deterioration. Consequently, a role for The Getty Conservation Institute emerged. The walls were plastered with a mixture of clay collected from a local riverbed, sand and plant fiber. Since 1989, the Getty Conservation Institute has worked with the Dunhuang Academy on the conservation and management of the site. Their collaboration has included a model project in Cave 85 established to determine causes of deterioration and to develop conservation solutions adaptable to other cave temples at this site, as well as at other Silk Road locations.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, May 11th, 2016 at 10:38 am and is filed under [Architecture](#), [Discourse](#), [Visual Art](#)

You can follow any responses to this entry through the [Comments \(RSS\)](#) feed. You can leave a response, or [trackback](#) from your own site.