

FRESCOES OF TUNHUANG

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1. INTRODUCTION:

From very early times, Frescoes have always occupied a predominant position in Chinese painting. From the Han and the Wei Dynasties onward, paintings began to appear on paper and silk, but they were far less important. The advent in China of Buddhism gave an added incentive to this particular branch of fine art. As frescoes in Buddhist temples and monasteries became also objects of worship. It is a matter of great regret that most of the ancient temples have been long razed to the ground and that only the caves at Tunhuang, with its remote location and dry climate, have been able to preserve their paintings.

The Frescoes of Tunhuang are housed in the caves of the Thousand Buddhas, 12 miles southeast of Tunghuang City, Kansu Province. They show a decided influence of the Buddhist Caves at Ajanta in Hyderabad India, so that they are housed not in rooms but on the walls of caves dug in precipitous cliffs. The paintings were first executed in the second year of the reign of Chien Yuan of the Eastern Ts'in Dynasty (344), and carried on through Northern Wei (386-556), Northern Chou (557-580), Sui 581-618), Tang (619-906), the Epoch of the Five Dynasties (907-959), down

to the 3rd year of Ching Yu in the reign of Emperor Jen Tsung of the Sung Dynesty, when the place fell into the hands of the Tangut Kingdom. (1032-1227) In their turn, the Tanguts continued the work too, but only in a very small way. The caves of Tunhuang had then begun their decline.

The Ming Dynasty did not think much of the place. When the Manchus reestablished Tunhuang during the reign of Emperor Yung Cheng (1723-1735), however, Chinese emigrants began to come in great hordes and to develop and explore the place. New Chinese paintings again appeared in the caves there, even, though artistically speaking, these late comers are a far cry from the original ones.

During the Northern Wei and Tang Dynasties, Tunhuang had been an important juncture in east-west communication. Many a merchant or nobleman, in his desire to please the gods, contributed large sums of money for the erection of Buddhist statues and murals. As almost every cave excavated before or during the Tang Dynasty has its distinguishing features to set each one apart from the other, It is fairly evident that the objects d'art in the caves were not wrought by local artisans, but by expert craftsman brought from some remote place especially for the purpose. With the exception of those preserved in its Caves of the Thousand Buddhas most of the paintings done prior to the Tang Dynasty are no longer extant, so that these caves constitute, in a sense, the finest museum of medieval Chinese painting to be found anywhere and offer the most reliable measure for assessing and arranging the latter's chronology.

Apart from those photographs taken by the Chinese

themselves these frescoes have been photographed primarily by Sir Aural Stein (as published in *Innermost Asia and Ruins of Desert Cathay*), and by Paul Pelliot (as published in *Les Grottes de Touen-houang*). The latter's work is especially praiseworthy for its richness of material and it is a pity that, owing to technical difficulties obtaining at the time, the pictures have all been executed in monochrome.

On the whole, the frescoes may be divided into four categories: (1) patterns, (2) stories, (3) portraits of Buddhas and (4) portraits of worshippers.

Pattern are of two kinds: (1) *Tsaoching* and *Tienhua*, both decorations for the ceiling, the former being designs that revolve around a domical center at the middle of the ceiling and the latter, scattered designs under the sloping roof with no central point; and (2) marginal adornments along the sides of the frescoes. They all show distinct characteristics identifying them with the period in which they were produced.

Stories generally illustrate the life of Buddha Gautama, the popular version of the Sutra Amitaba, the Sutra of One Hundred Parables, the Sutra Vimalakirti, and such as have been mentioned in other Buddhist scriptures. The store is very rich and to a great extent also portrays the social life of medieval China.

The majority of the Portraits are of Sakyamuni, (Gautama) the others being distributed among Amitabha, the bodhisattvas and devas. In general, portraits done before the Sui Dynasty are chiefly of bodhisattvas in Chinese cloth-

ing, while those done during and after Tang times are dressed like Indians, with devas attending upon them, either beside the doors or in the four corners near the ceiling.

Donors who gave money to the construction of these caves were painted too, and their portraits with their names written thereon constitute the last category. As these were executed in different ages, their clothing and ornaments give

us a clear picture of the times and customs they represent. The first period, encompassing the fourth Century through to the seventh, shows the influence off Central Asia, the clothes in the portraits are so tight fitting they may be worn even today. The second period starts with the eighth century, and the clothes of this period are so loose fitting they look like the Japanese kimono. From the Western Hsia (Tangut) Dynasty on, women are dressed in the long gowns worn chiefly by Tangut-Tibetan women.

Landscapes and architectural features are but backdrops in the murals off Tunhuang, yet they have historical significance too. Places of the Northern Wei and Tang Dynasties are drawn in great detail, showing minutely the abacuses and the arches of a definitely Chinese order. They can be adopted harmoniously near the entrance of a level-roof or Grecian edifice or in the center of the more modernistic cubic buildings.

As to landscape, painting we know it was quite developed during Tang times but as an art it achieved maturity only in the Epoch of the Five Dynasties. The murals show clearly the evolutions from Northern Wei to Tang. Landscape

painting has been considered as representative of the Chinese style of painting, but this medium of artistic expression has not been formed overnight.

In 1943, the National Government of the Republic of China set up an Art Research Institute at the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas charged with the cataloguing of these caves. Of the 427 caves then counted, 309 were bigger ones. They occupy a length of 1612 meters with over 2000 statues. The murals occupy a total area of over 25000 square meters.

Tunhuang murals reproduced in the National Historical Museum of Taipei are based on Kodachrome transparent films taken by Mr. Lo Chimei at the caves, which are projected on white walls, then traced and painted the original color. This work was executed by Mr. K. M. Hu. The most desirable way of reproduction would be facsimiles of some caves in their entirety, but, because of lack of space, we have to be content with reproductions representative of murals of the different dynasties, chronologically arranged. They are, to be sure, merely a selection, but it is hoped that lovers of Tunhuang art will be enabled to see in them in something approaching the original atmosphere.

2. TUNHUANG PAST AND PRESENT

Tunhuang is situated at the westernmost end of the corridor west of the Yellow River, 650 li from Suchow and 240 li from Ansi. If the place is approached from Ansi, it is necessary to leave the Kansu-Sinkiang Highway, travel in the boundless Gobi Desert, and pass one ruined and un-

inhabited city, and two villages each with only one family as its entire population before reaching the city. On the way, snow-capped mountains are seen far south, together with many beacons, leftovers from Tang times, consisting of one big mound and four small ones, which, in times of old, were used for signally purposes by sending up puffs of smoke in the Red Indian fashion.

That Tunhuang could have attained great importance in its day, so far removed from China Proper as it is, can be attributed to its geographical location. It used to be the principal oasis west of the Chiayu Pass, and when one goes farther west from Tunhuang, whether it is to Hami in the north or to Lolan (a ruin near Lake Lobnor) in the west, or to Charklik in the southwest, one has to trek the desert for seven or eight days. From very early times Turkestan presented two menacing hazards for the Chinese traveler, one is the Muztagh Ata, rearing 7-8000 feet above the Pamir Plateau; the other is the Ghost Sanddunes between Tunhuang and Shan-shan, an area uninhabited by man or beast, and where mirages offer endless perils.

It can be then that Tunhuang was in its day a fertile place amid miles upon miles of wasteland, and an important communication center where traders going west had to store their goods and equip themselves for the hard trip ahead. The place also yielded gold dust, and was the meeting place for traders dealing in embroideries, raw medicine, spices, gold, silver and precious stones.

Metescological changes over the last few thousand years have made glaciers recede, wet and cold climates dry and

hot. In central Asia, where the armies of Alexander the Great Once marched, it is now extreamly difficult to provide for a caravan of 20 people. Tunhuang was the victim of these fickle changes. It had been the most peaceful region in the land during the Northern and Southern Dynasties, yet it suffered seriously from natural setbacks. The national strength of the Sui and the Tang Dynasties was hardly equal to that of the Han, and what with the invasions by the Khitan Tartars and the Mongolians, the situation there worsened until the place was abandoned in the Ming Dynasty, and its people ordered removed to inside the Chiayu Pass. In the process, the population here dwindled, cultivated land became desolate through disuse, and the surrounding desert made its inroads. When Emperor Yung Cheng of the Ching resettled the place, it could never return to its pristine state.

The Tunhuang of Han, or, for that matter, of Tang times, was better than the Tunhuang of today, and to a great degree. In volume 420, *Tai-Ping Kuang-Chi*, it is recorded that, "Northwest of Shachou (Tunhuang), is the Black River, deep enough for boating. It frequently floods so much that houses and fields are ruined. As a result, no crop can be planted there and the inhabitants have to move away." The Black River is now known as the Shuleh River. According to the *Records of Turkestan Waterways*, when General Yuch Chung-chi under Emperor Yung Cheng led his expedition here, only small craft could be managed, and even these had to be sunk when he reached the River of Two Pagodas. At present, the lower valley of the Shuleh River is navigable only for a very short period in the year.

the natives, there used to be snow several feet deep in winter, blocking all traffic between Tunhuang and Ansi, but even snow has decreased in volume in recent years.

The decrease of snow accounts partially for the story. The reduction of tillable land can also be attributed to the abusive logging activities on Mountain Chilian. Tunhuang has no coal deposit and its populace of 26,000 has to rely on wood from the mountain for cooking and heating. When the forests on the mountain are more and more reduced, the snowline recedes higher and higher, until the mountain completely loses its power to meditate with the climate. There is now almost no district in Northwest China which is really self-sufficient, and before the main railway is completed, no constructive work can be carried out there.

In size, Tunhuang is comparable to the part of Kiangsu Province south of the Yangtse River, yet its tillage is no bigger than 30 li (15 Kilometers) east-west and 20 li south-north, exclusive of another piece of cultivated land at Nanhu, which is about 5 or 6 li in circumference. The rest of the area is nine tenths desert and one tenth pasturage, which, owing to lack of irrigation, has to be left unused except by some occasional Mogolians who come with their flocks of sheep.

The old city of Tunhuang is situated west of the Tang River, while the new city is on the other bank. The history of this walled city can be guessed conveniently on the basis of the broken pieces of Han pottery and the Yuan pagodas found there.

But, since it was abandoned during the Ming Dynasty and its western half was washed away by the Tang River, all that is left of it now is an area half a Kilometer west-east and one Kilometer south-north, renamed the Lih sien Fang, or Lih sien Section.

At the northwest corner of the new city, built during the reign of Emperor Yung Cheng of the Ching Dynasty, is another walled area called the "Inner City," which occupies one fourth of the whole city. Surrounding this in the east and the south is the "City Gate Zone," which makes up the remaining three fourths. The west wall of the "City Gate Zone" is actually the east wall of the old city, which, because of the shift of course of the Tang River, is left standing across the waterway. The city government is in the Inner City, as are most of the people living here. The business district is the street outside the East Gate. Export here consists of only cotton, and its imports are cotton cloth and machine made goods. The place is good for raising cotton because Tunhuang is the lowest in elevation and has the least rainfall among all the cities in the Yellow River corridor. From wooden blocks of the Han Dynasty discovered here it is learned that clothing constituted a major problem in ancient times because silk piece goods had to come from far east. Now that Tunhuang has plenty of cotton, the problem no longer exists. This is one result of east-west communication.

80 li north of Tunhuang lies the north end of the Great Wall of the Han Dynasty. It has been erroneously thought that the Great Wall runs east to Shanhaikuan and west (or north) to Blungchi. Actually, however, it ended at Chiayu Pass in the west during the Ming Dynasty, and, what is

left of the Han Great wall ends near the Fuchang Beacon, west of the Yumen Pass. Inside the confines of Tunhuang, the Great Wall runs west along the Shuleh River, built with layer upon layer of adobe blocks and of some plant stalk. Salty water was used in mixing mud, which, when aged, became like glue. Along the Wall are many beacons, approximately one in every ten li. The beacons are built with mud cakes or adobe. It was near here that Sir Aurel Stein found the Han wooden blocks. The Yumen Pass is a walled city 80-80 feet in area, about 250 li from Tunhuang.

The Caves of the Thousand Buddhas are on the U-shaped bluff of a canyon 12 miles southeast of Tunhuang. 30 li east of the canyon is the trident-like Mountain of Three Hazards, and 30 li west of it is the Mountain of Noisy Sands. The caves are on the eroded cliff west of the piece of terrace ground between the two mountains extending north and south, 2 kilometers. The three-stratum caves command a small brook, and number over 500 of which 330 are fully furnished with frescos and effigies. Among these latter, 70 constructed and furnished during the Northern Wei (House of Toba, 386-501) and Sui Dynasties (581-618), and over 200 were done during Tang and early Sung times. The works in the Wei caves have a strong resemblance to the works at Turfan, Sinkiang, and Ajanta, India, whereas those of Tang and the Epoch of the Five Dynasties are eminently Chinese. This divergency bespeaks rather eloquently the great significance that attended the conquest of the Chen Dynasty by Emperor Wen Ti of Sui.

Since no paintings of Wei and few of Tang exist today aside from those at Tunhuang, the art treasure of the Caves

of the Thousand Buddhas is important and valuable on many counts, the least of which would be that it serves as a museum of medieval Chinese art.

3. THE CAVES OF THE THOUSAND BUDDHAS AND MURAL PAINTINGS OF TUNHUANG

The art of mural painting first began to appear during the New Stone Age. Even today there are colored murals of that age left in some mountain caves in France and Spain. On the walls of tombs of the Yin Dynasty, too, are found patternic decorations. *The Questions to the Heavens* by Chu Yuan were raised when the author saw the pictures of ancient monarchs on the walls in the royal ancestral shrine of the Kingdom of Chu. During the Han Dynasty, walls in the royal courts were also embellished with drawings of former kings and eminent administrators, and the Arcade of Unicorn and the Cloud Terrace were built for housing the portraits of famous officials of the time. These murals are, to be sure, no longer extant, but it is known for certain that, in the Eastern Han Dynasty, many shrines which formed part of some cemeteries had pictures in bas relief after court murals, as some of these are still preserved to this day.

When it was still confined to the reaches of India, Buddhism had already had frescos on cave walls dedicated to the illustration of its teachings. Since the religion was introduced to China, its drawings had been widely adopted in the newly erected temples. Many caves were prepared for the accommodation of this alien art, notably the Cave of the Thousand Buddhas at Tunhuang, which are said to have

begun during the Dynasty of Former Chin (beginning 305 A.D.). Many new caves and paintings were added to the old in the subsequent Dynasties of Northern Wei, Sui and Tang, with each period showing specific characteristics. At the beginning of the Sung Dynasty, these caves became a veritable storehouse of Chinese art.

Geography explains the existence of this artistic storehouse. The corridor west of the Yellow River is a narrow but long strip of fertile soil. North of the corridor is a great desert, while south of it the terrain is rugged with high mountain ranges on which snow remains unmelted all the year round. The corridor is therefore the only inhabitable place which, by its location, happened in ancient times to be also the center of communication between East Asia and Central Asia, a position that was significant both politically and culturally.

During the period of the Warring States and the early years of the Han Dynasty, the land had first been occupied by the Yueh Chi and Usun tribes, and later by the Huns, the exploited its strategical position to control the whole Turkestan. In 121 A.D., Emperor Wu Ti of Han sent an expeditionary force headed by General Huo Chu-fing and vanquished the Huns. The district was first opened to military colonization and then civil settlement. When the area was sufficiently cultivated, four prefectures were established here; Wuwei, Changyeh, Tsiuchuan and Tunhuang of which the last one was the westernmost.

Oasis though the four prefectures west of the Yellow River all are, they have to depend on water from the southern

mountains for all purposes, as there is little rain in the year. Yet, because water from melting snow is more punctual and certain than rain, the district never complains of drought, but is quite fertile and well irrigated.

Tunhuang occupies an especially favorable position in this area in that it strategically guards the gateway to Yang Kuan and Yumen Pass, and that it is the first port of entry in China for any cultural importation from the continental west via Turkestan. With the stationing here of governors of the whole district during both Later Han and Tang, Tunhuang early achieved a high level of culture which found expression in its Buddhist paintings and its Buddhist paintings and its collection of books.

The Cave of the Thousand Buddhas is a popular name. It was officially called from the Tang Dynasty to the Yuan the Mokao Cavern. They are 40 li from Tunhuang City, and consist of caves excavated out of a sheer cliff. To the south is a fountainhead which forms a little brook flowing through a canyon and out at the north end to disappear in the desert. On either side of the brook are planted poplars. Needless to mention that the cliff is the produce of the endless erosion of the brook.

It is said that during the reign of Former Tsin, a Buddhist friar from inland China came to dig the first cave. Because of the geographical location of the place and the prevalence of Buddhism at the time, the caves became, in Yuan Dynasty, a veritable honeycomb one mile in length.

The murals preserved here have been fortunate in that Tunhuang never became too prosperous or easily accessible,

and for quite a time it was not even in Chinese hands, so that they never met the fate of those at Changan or Loyang, which have all been destroyed, but remained as they originally were as late as the Ming Dynasty, with some poor renovation jobs done to them only in the Tsing or Manchu Dynasty. On the other hand, they have been unfortunate too, in that they stayed in oblivion until the last years of Tsing.

The first thing from Tunhuang to come to people's notice has not been the murals but the popularized versions of Buddhist scriptures stored in a vault in the Caves of One Thousand Buddhas. In 1900, an itinerant Taoist named Wang came from Hupeh. (It will be noted that, though the west region of Kansu Province were originally Buddhistic, the religion had declined during the last few centuries, and the Caves Of One Thousand Buddha lodged by lamas had but few monks by them. The prevalent religion at this particular juncture was Taoism, whose priests performed various rites and services for the people and worshiped Buddhist idols.) He had made the journey to find a living.

Wang the Taoist obtained one of the caves as his quarters. Everyday he copied Taoist scriptures for his use at the rites. One day he noticed a crack on the wall, and, digging into it, came upon a niche wherein were stored many sacred books. These he used as presents to people who made donations to him.

In March, 1907, Sir Aurel Stein of England then sent on a tour of archaeological research by the government of British India arrived at the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas after he had discovered a sizable amount of wood slips, documents of the Han Dynasty. He bribed the Taoist and

took with him some of the more complete sets of Buddhist tales and pictures. Later, the French sinologist, Paul Pelliot, did the same thing. Many of the books stored here are different from those in print. When both Stein and Pelliot photographed and published their find, scholars all over the world came to know the name of the Caves of The Thousand Buddhas and the great treasure of art that miraculously existed there.

There are points one would do better to bear in mind: First, regarding statues, because the rocks here were unsuited for sculpture, clay was used instead. Special attention, therefore, should be paid to the pigments used on the statues besides postures besides posture. The fact that the statues retain their original color indicates the quality of pigments used. Comparable to these are the statues at the Meitsi Mountain near Tienshui, Kansu, also of Wei, but less in number and size. As the statues at Tunhuang comprise all periods, comparative work may be carried on between them and other Buddhist sculpture at Yun-Kang, Luo-Men, the Cliff of One Thousand Buddhas (Kuangyuan, Szechuan). Tachu, Mount Tsi-hsia (Nanking) and Mount Tien-lung (Taiyuan, Shansi). Furthermore, as Tunhuang has been the center of communication between China and Turkestan, comparison may also be made between the statues here and those in Indian Central Asia.

Second, the murals, including the patterns of Tsaoching decorations inside of dome and Tienhua, (ceiling patterns) usually the cynosure of all attention, began early and continued long, so that they represented the progress and advancement of Chinese painting from around the 5th Century down

to early Ming. This unbroken continuity of nearly 1,000 years in painting cannot be found at any other place in the country, enabling people to revise many of their misconceptions about ancient painting or painters.

Then, in the repertoire of Chinese art, it will be noted that the original wealth of native patterns of China has been augmented by that of Central Asia. From the Sun Dynasty on, as painting came to be more and more the pastime and medium of expression for scholars, pattern designing has been greatly neglected. This results in the near poverty in China along this line, especially from the utilitarian point of view. With the coming to notice of Tunhuang murals, attention has been directed also to the patterns. In the rearrangement and cataloging of these patterns are involved not only their design but also coloring, so that a difficulty is posed. When we get around to finishing the job, however, there can be no doubt but that the patterns will offer potentialities for application and enhance the value of this particular part of China's artistic heritage.

Furthermore, though the murals are generally religious in nature, they encompass also landscape, furniture and utensils, plants, wildlife, dances and rituals, and scaled down buildings.

Even the Buddhist stories portrayed here offer fields for exploration, as they varied with the development and the fashion of the different schools and times. Researches on Tunhuang Murals by Eieiche Matsumoto of Japan which investigates into the stories remains the most important reference book in this field, but much leaves still to be desired.

Third, architecturally, the caves, with the murals, are also a great museum of architecture. They show the relationship between the architecture of China and that of India. The most salient feature in the Wei paintings are far as architecture is concerned, is the use of Λ -shape arch, found also in the caves at Lung Men and Yun-Kang, and the Hohuryu Temple of Nara, Japan, which was built during the Sui Dynasty of China. For T'ang architecture, the very important record is found in the bas reliefs at the Wild Geese Tower, Sian, but here at Tunhuang there are also models.

In conclusion, it is safe to say that the artistic treasure at Tunhuang is comprehensive in subject matter and important for further research. How to make use of all this great legacies of China's culture and civilization remains the concern of all who will have interest in the problem.

4. PATTERNS AND MURALS OF TUNHUANG ANALYTICAL SURVEY

1. Periods of the Murals

The Murals at the Caves of The Thousand Buddhas, Tunhuang, are the prize of Chinese art, in periods ranging from the Northern Wei, Northern Chou, Sui, Tang, the Epoch of the Five Short Dynasties and Sung. In this period of several centuries and dynasties, the content is a veritable priceless wealth. Their value is especially enhanced by the fact that few T'ang paintings exist today, let alone those of the Northern Wei. Yet, here in these caves, many productions of Northern Wei, Sui and T'ang are preserved. They are the fountainhead to be tapped in the compilation of any