

To Reform and Develop Based on the Past: the Aesthetic Study of Dunhuang Murals and its Self-disciplined Development

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Abstract: *Dunhuang murals are an important part of the Chinese traditional art, they are rich in content, diverse in shapes, vivid in color and have a very high artistic level and historical value. They are an inclusive treasure house of arts and cultural carrier. While giving artists creative motive sources, Dunhuang murals also provide us with the value of analysis and reflection on how to combine them with the Chinese modern and contemporary art, so their unique artistic value can blend with the emerging materials and inject new vitality into the Chinese modern and contemporary art, so that a broader creative space will be open up.*

Keywords: *Dunhuang murals, Aesthetic characteristics, Inheritance, Innovation*

In the five thousand years of Chinese nation, Dunhuang murals are the crystallization of the collective wisdom of the ancient Chinese people, and their unique artistic style shows the charm that is transcending time and space. Therefore, the study of its artistic charm has certain academic value and significance of the era. Artists extract representative elements from Dunhuang murals, which provide a source of inspiration and new possibilities for the diversified creation of modern and contemporary art. Nowadays, with the continuous improvements in aesthetic needs and spiritual pursuits, some Chinese artists reconstruct and combine these unique elements. Dunhuang murals have therefore integrated into the art as a popular trend, making Dunhuang murals "revive" in the modern and contemporary art and awakening its exclusive charm.

1. Historical Background of Dunhuang Murals

In the long historical process, religion plays an important role in social life, and art has continuously penetrated into all aspects of social life. Religion and art have always maintained a relationship of mutual generation and restriction. They seem to be independent from each other, but in fact they are related to each other. The establishment of religion stems from people's exploration of the mysterious forces beyond the real world, which leads to a sense of awe for this mystery and then a special social ideology was formed. A series of religious consciousness activities is essentially a kind of spiritual sustenance and pursuit of human being, and also a kind of worship and belief in supernatural power. In order for religious doctrines to be effectively disseminated, understood and accepted by the ordinary people, the church needs to systematically explain them with the help of appropriate means, and art is one of the most intuitive and concrete means. Therefore, it can be said that religious art is an artistic expression of religious thought and an externalized form of religious doctrine.

About two thousand five hundred years ago, Buddhism was founded by Shakyamuni in ancient India, followed by the Buddhist art. Buddhist art came to China through a transportation route connecting different civilizations and ancient countries, namely the Land Silk Road. During the Wei-Jin North-South periods, China's domestic social situation was unstable and political divisions appeared, which accelerated the cultural integration of various ethnic groups to a certain extent, facilitating the rapid development of Buddhism and laying a good political and economic foundation for the development of Buddhist art. During the Sui and Tang Dynasties, Buddhist art reached its peak. Through the selective absorption, integration and creative reconstruction of Buddhist art by Chinese artists and skilled craftsmen, the Buddhist art started to show the characteristics of Chinese localization. Artistic achievements of Buddhist art are mainly reflected in the four major grottoes, especially the Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang.

2. Analysis of the Artistic Characteristics of Dunhuang Murals

2.1. The Composition of Dunhuang Murals

In terms of dealing with the picture space, Chinese artists absorbed the Indian painting style of continuous narrative, which changed the form of painting in the early days of China, that is, telling the whole story in a single picture. Artists in the Sui and Tang Dynasties took into consideration the Chinese nation's aesthetic needs for symmetrical beauty, they therefore adopted a unique symmetrical form in the space setting of mural painting and presented a symmetrical form in the architectural space as well. The Amitāyurdhyāna Sūtra in the Mogao Grottoes adopts a symmetrical "three-part composition" form. Centered on the Painting of the Amitāyurdhyāna Sūtra, its vertical sections on both sides are symmetrical. From top to bottom in a narrative way, it illustrates the story of the evil king Ajashi and the story of his mother Vesitha praying to the Buddha.

2.2. Line Treatment of Dunhuang Murals

The Dunhuang murals depict characters in the way of "Meticulous Heavy Color Painting". "Meticulous" means drawing with neat and detailed lines. Therefore, the line is one of the artistic expression methods that plays a critical role in creating Dunhuang murals. In different periods, the use of lines also varied. Buddhist murals in the Wei and Jin Dynasties used the traditional painting method of murals, which used line-based color flat painting to highlight the two-dimensional plane space. Lines played an important role in the murals, and they have experienced the evolution from iron-wire drawing to orchid-leaf drawing. The painting style, image design of characters and the painting techniques of the murals in the Tang Dynasty are more flexible. The Portrait of Vimalakirti by Daozi Wu on the south side of the east wall of the 103rd Cave in Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang shows the artistic characteristics of "the Sashes in Wu's painting flutter as if in the wind". The brush strokes are bold and the lines are sharp and conspicuous. The skin on the forehead and between the eyebrows of the character is smudged with ocher red to express the excitement from the argument, which enhances the appeal of the characters.

2.3. The color expression of Dunhuang murals

Color is one of the most infectious artistic elements in Dunhuang murals. In different historical stages, the colors of Dunhuang murals present different aesthetic values and are full of special vitality. During the Wei and Jin Dynasties, the Dunhuang murals used the concave-convex glazing technique to show the three-dimensional image of the characters. It used red clay as the base, black lines as the outline, with mellow tones. Azurite and mineral green are added to the painting in contrast to the main colors of red, brown, black and white, making the overall tone of the Dunhuang murals warm while mysterious and remote. The Dunhuang murals in the Sui Dynasty have been deeply influenced by traditional Chinese culture, and they have been further localized and have shown changes and innovations. Although the painting was still made on red clay, the proportion of azurite and mineral green in the tones was increasing, and the main tone gradually became blue and green. This shift of color is similar to the popularity of the blue-green landscape paintings at that time. In the Tang Dynasty, and the colors in Dunhuang Murals developed more diverse in form. First, the base color changed, loess and white clay were gradually used as the base, and composite colors started to be used. In addition to stone green, grass green, patina, and dark green were added to "green color" to make style of the pictures rich and harmonious. Under the interplay and delicate changes of different color blocks of blue, green, red, white (gold) and black, the Dunhuang murals reveal rich and elegant charm. In the Dunhuang murals at the late stage, the color purity declined. There was a tendency of being elegant, calm and gentle, which lacked subtle changes.

3. Self-disciplined Development of Dunhuang Murals

It can be seen from the Dunhuang Murals that the Chinese art not only has endless creativity, but also great inclusiveness. Since the development of Chinese traditional art, the infinite richness of artistic expressions and the renewal of artistic concepts have led to different artistic styles and created new artistic ideological trends. Among them, some of the traditional arts are also integrating with the fresh blood and creating different possibilities. The problem is, with the continuous development of Chinese contemporary art, whether Dunhuang murals can overcome the challenges of the times and

undergo new developments.

As a carrier of cultural dissemination, the Dunhuang murals have countless works, which are the Buddhist art classics whose preservation is relatively complete today. Just because of the extremely high artistic achievements of Dunhuang murals, domestic artists and researchers are attracted to Dunhuang for inspection and investigation, copying and researching about the Dunhuang murals, sorting out and compiling them into academic materials. In this way, the Dunhuang murals are transplanted into temporary books, which continues its artistic vitality, and is beneficial to the further exploration and learning of the Dunhuang murals by artists. It is also beneficial for them to use its artistic characteristics as the starting point to open up the space for creation of the Chinese contemporary art to provide a unique visual experience to the audiences.

The packaging design of Dunhuang alcohol is a case of learning from Dunhuang murals. In the design process, the designer refined the relevant elements and symbols in the Dunhuang murals which inspired a steady stream of inspiration. Firstly, the middle part of the outer package of the product is hollowed out, which fits the shape of the stone gate of Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang. This design also reveals part of the Dunhuang murals drawn inside of the package, providing the viewers an immersive experience and making them feel like visiting the Dunhuang Grottoes to watch the murals. The classic symmetrical composition of murals is adopted on both sides of the arch, and the very representative image of the "Feitian" is drawn on both sides, which echoes the mural elements in the middle, making the whole design dynamic and three-dimensional, visually attractive and pleasing.

Dunhuang murals not only inherited and innovated in the form of artistic expression, but also have a certain degree of inheritance in ideological and aesthetic concepts. For example, in the Dunhuang murals, there is a comic-style painting of the story "The Deer King Jataka", which expresses the idea of "sacrificing oneself to save others", praising the spirit of selfless dedication, and spreading the idea of what goes around comes around. This story was adapted into the well-known classic cartoon "Nine-Colored Deer" in 1981. This cartoon adopts the painting expression of Dunhuang murals. It uses classical Chinese Buddhist painting style to tell people that the nice-colored deer was willing to help others but was betrayed by those who had been helped by the deer, and then the deer used magic power to reduce the risks, and the betrayer received the punishments they deserve. It shows that those noble qualities such as "truth, goodness and beauty" in the Buddhist teachings are not only unique to human beings, but "Buddha nature" can also be found in animals. It emphasizes the concepts of clear distinguishment between good and evil in Buddhism.

In the artistic treasure house of Dunhuang murals, their artistic expression and concepts can be used as inspiration sources for the creation of the Chinese modern and contemporary art. The artistic potential behind them is worthy of exploring and researching, using for reference and inheriting by the Chinese artists. For example, the composition method that was inherited for thousands of years, the technique of using "lines" to express ideas, which represents the pure ideals of Buddhism. As a representative of Chinese traditional art, Dunhuang murals mainly play an enlightening role. The integration of their artistic expression techniques into Chinese modern and contemporary art is not only the inheritance and innovation of Chinese traditional art, but also the continuation of the vitality of Dunhuang murals. In this process, the excellent traditional national culture is rooted in the process of artistic development and integrated into the process of the development of world civilization, bringing better national artistic charm into the broader world of art.

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