Dunhuang Caves

The Dunhuang Caves include three sites of Buddhist cave shrines located near the desert oasis city of Dunhuang. Decorated with spectacular wall paintings and sculpture, and once the repositories for a treasure trove of Buddhist texts (such as the Diamond Sutra, now in the British Museum), the caves were added to the list of UNESCO’s World Heritage Sites in 1987.

The Dunhuang Caves are three sites of Buddhist cave shrines located near the city of Dunhuang, a desert oasis lying on the ancient Silk Roads: the Western Qianfodong 西千佛洞 (Western Caves of the Thousand Buddhas), located approximately 3.2 kilometers west of Dunhuang; the Yulin Caves 榆林窟, located approximately 168 kilometers east of Dunhuang; and the Mogao Caves 莫高窟, the most important site, located approximately 40 kilometers southeast of Dunhuang.

The most extensive surviving early Chinese Buddhist material culture is found at the cave temples of Mogao. Here, beginning in the early fourth century and continuing for the next one thousand years, more than one thousand caves were hollowed out of the cliff face at the edge of Mingsha (Dunes of the Singing Sands). Nearly five hundred of the caves are decorated with spectacular sculptures and wall paintings. In 1900 a hidden cache of nearly fifty thousand documents was discovered in what came to be known as the Library Cave, which had been sealed in the early eleventh century. Found in this treasure trove of material was a copy of the Diamond Sutra; its date of 868 makes it the world’s oldest printed text (a sutra is one of the discourses of the Buddha that constitutes the basic text of Buddhist scripture). Also found in the Library Cave was a variety of art forms that includes paintings on silk, woodblock prints on paper, calligraphy, and embroidery.

The site for the Mogao Caves was selected by the wandering monk Yuezun, who set out to excavate the first caves in 366 after beholding the golden glow of one thousand Buddhas floating there, giving rise to the site’s alternate name of Qianfodong (Cave of the Thousand Buddhas). These early caves were used for meditation, but in time they also served as a monastery and a religious center. Decorating of some of the caves came soon after Yuezun’s initial work. The caves contain wall paintings of spectacular beauty. Life-size sculptures were added, but because the stone at Dunhuang is too friable (easily crumbled) and not suitable for sculpture, they were fashioned from clay formed over a wooden armature and then painted.

The history of the caves is also a history of invasions. Central Asian influence on the caves was the result of Arab conquests in the mid-eighth century. The occupation by Tibet, beginning in 781 and lasting until 848, resulted in new caves painted with Tibetan Buddhist iconography. The Tibetans also protected the site from the strong anti-Buddhist persecution in 845 that had a profound effect on the rest of China. In 1006, when Islamic armies from Kashgar conquered the Buddhist city of Khotan, fear that Mogao would soon be next likely prompted the monks to seal thousands of manuscripts in the cave. However,
Islamic culture would not reach Dunhuang until after the invasion of the Mongol conqueror Genghis Khan’s army in 1227, which destroyed the city. Artistic activity continued under the Mongols until at least 1357 owing to favor that Tibetan monks had at court. After the fall of the Mongols, Arab armies controlled central Asia, and Islam became the dominant religion, effectively ending work at the caves. As traffic along the Silk Roads declined when sea travel replaced overland routes, the caves were all but forgotten and would remain so until the first years of the twentieth century.

Library Cave Found

In the 1890s the Daoist monk Wang Yuanlu (c. 1849–1931) settled at the Mogao Caves and became the self-appointed guardian of the site. While overseeing restoration work in Cave 16, he found a crack in the wall that revealed a hidden entrance to another cave. Here was the so-called Library Cave (Cave 17), which contained a wealth of manuscripts, paintings, embroideries, and banners filling the cave from floor to ceiling. In 1902 the collection was to be relocated to the provincial capital, Lanzhou, but because of the high cost of moving it, Wang was ordered to put the material back into the cave and reseal it.

In March 1907 Sir Aurel Stein (1862–1943), an archaeologist and explorer of central Asia, arrived at the site. Acting on behalf of the British Museum, Stein was awestruck by the vivid color of the murals and painted statues and referred to the site as a “wonderful beehive of temples.” Wang was at first reluctant to allow any of the Library Cave materials to be removed, but he was soon swayed by Stein, who offered contributions to the restoration of the site in exchange for the scrolls. In all, Stein left with twenty-four cases that contained thousands of manuscripts and fragments and five cases of paintings and embroideries, all of which he purchased for £130. Among his finds was the Diamond Sutra, which is now in the British Library.

After Stein came the French sinologist Paul Pelliot (1878–1943) in 1908. Owing to his ability to read Chinese, Pelliot was able to select the most scholarly and historically significant items from the material Stein had left behind. He paid £90 for the thousands of manuscripts that now rest in the Musée Guimet in Paris. Although the Chinese made an effort to limit the dissemination of Dunhuang material to foreigners, nearly six hundred documents were sold to the Japanese in 1914, two hundred to the Russians in 1914, five cases again to Stein in 1914, and twelve sections of wall paintings to Langdon Warner of the Fogg Museum at Harvard in the 1920s. Thus, the contents of the Library Cave have been scattered worldwide. In 1993 the British Library began a project to unite these objects on the Internet. The International Dunhuang Project is designed to promote the research and preservation of the Dunhuang material in an international arena.

Preservation Efforts

Today the site is in remarkable condition, given its age. The cliff face has weathered over the centuries, and the instability of the sandstone has resulted in the collapse of some sections of the caves. The wall paintings are cracked and peeling. Smoke from fires set in the caves left a layer of soot on the walls. Vandals have defaced some portions, and the presence of Stein and the others has left its mark. Still, the wall paintings and sculptures retain their brilliance. In 1944 the Dunhuang Research Institute (now the Dunhuang Academy) was established to focus on research and conservation of the site. In 1980 the caves were opened to the public. In 1988 the Getty Conservation Institute joined the Chinese in studying the deterioration of the caves and methods to preserve them. In 1987 the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) designated Dunhuang as a World Heritage Site.

Catherine PAGANI

Further Reading


