

DUNHUANG

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Dunhuang is a city (pop. 187,578 (2000)) in northwestern Gansu province, Western China. It was a major stop on the ancient Silk Road. It is best known for the nearby Dunhuang Caves. It commands a very strategic position at the crossroads of the ancient Southern Silk Route and the main road leading from India via Lhasa to Mongolia and Southern Siberia, as well as

controlling the entrance to the narrow Hexi Corridor which led straight to the heart of the north Chinese plains and the ancient capitals of Chang'an (today known as Xi'an) and Luoyang. The ruins of a Han Dynasty (202 BC - 220 AD) Chinese watchtower made of rammed earth at Dunhuang, Gansu province, the eastern

edge of the Silk Road Dunhuang was one the frontier garrison towns established by the Emperor Wu after the defeat of Xiongnu, and the Chinese built fortifications at Dunhuang and sent settlers there. The name Dunhuang, or Blazing Beacon, refers to the beacons lit to warn of attacks by marauding nomadic tribes. Dunhuang Commandery was probably established in 104 BC, or shortly thereafter. Located in the western end of the Hexi Corridor near the historic junction of the Northern and Southern Silk Roads, Dunhuang was a town of military importance.

By the second century AD Dunhuang had a population of more than 76,000 and was a key supply base for caravans that passed through the



city. Dunhuang prospered on the heavy flow of traffic. The first Buddhist caves in the Dunhuang area were hewn in 353.

In later centuries, during the Sui and Tang dynasties, it was a major point of communication between ancient China and Central Asia. By the Tang Dynasty it became the major hub of commerce of the Silk Road. Early Buddhist monks arrived at Dunhuang via the ancient Northern Silk Road, the northernmost route of about 2,600 kilometres (1,600 mi) in length, which connected the ancient Chinese capital of Xi'an westward over the Wushao

Ling Pass to Wuwei and on to Kashgar.

For centuries, Buddhist monks at Dunhuang collected scriptures from the West, and many pilgrims passed through the area, painting murals inside the Mogao Caves or "Caves of a Thousand Buddhas."

A small number of Christian artifacts have also been found in the caves, testimony to the

wide variety of people who made their way along the Silk Road.

Dunhuang went into a steep decline after the Chinese trade with the outside world became dominated by Southern sea-routes, and the Silk Road was officially abandoned during the Ming Dynasty. It was occupied again by the Tibetans in 1516, but retaken by China two centuries later ca. 1715 during Qing Dynasty.

Today, the site is an important tourist attraction and the subject of an ongoing archaeological project. A large number of manuscripts and artifacts retrieved at Dunhuang have been digitized and made publicly available via the International Dunhuang Project.

FEATURE

The Buddhist Caves of Dunhuang

A Treasure Trove in the Chinese Gobi Desert

BY MIMI GATES



As a specialist in Chinese art, I am fascinated by the extraordinary artistic richness of the Buddhist Caves of Dunhuang, located in Gansu province, in Northwest China. After stepping aside as director of the Seattle Art Museum in July 2009, preserving this site for future generations has become my passion.

Dunhuang is known as the “throat of the Silk Road” because of its strategic location. Silk Road, or (seidenstrasse) is a term coined in 1877 by the German explorer Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen to refer to trade routes stretching across the huge land mass linking China with the Mediterranean world.

Dunhuang was a hub of traffic between East and West and the place where the cultures of Greece & Rome, Persia & the Middle East, India and China intersected with one another.

Throughout the first millennium of our era, merchants of many nationalities traversed





Cave 285 at Mogaoku is a meditation cave with a square main hall, a truncated pyramidal ceiling, and a square central altar. Inscriptions dating from the fourth and fifth year of the Western Wei dynasty's Datong era (538-539 AD) distinguish it as the only early period cave bearing an exact construction date

these overland routes. Caravans heading west from China carried silk, furs, ceramics, jade and spices, while those heading east to China brought ivory, gems, and gold, among many other luxury goods. The oasis of Dunhuang was a lively trade center on the Silk Road.



Cave 158 (High Tang, 712–781 AD) The 15.6 meter recumbent Buddha, serene in death with anguished disciples and mourners, is an iconic image of Mogaoku

Buddhist monks also frequented these overland routes. Indian Buddhists journeyed east, spreading their faith across Central and East Asia, while Chinese monks traveled west to explore the origins of their faith in India, the place where the historic Buddha, Sakyamuni, lived in the 5th c. BC. , and returned home carrying Buddhist scriptures which they translated into Chinese.

Buddhism made its way from India to China during the Han dynasty, 206 BCE-220, if not earlier. After the fall of the Han dynasty in 220, during the turbulent Six Dynasties period, Mahayana Buddhism took hold and was widely disseminated. In contrast to

Confucianism, which provides a well-ordered social system, Buddhism is transcendent, offering hope of an afterlife.

For Buddhists, commissioning caves was an act of devotion, a way to gain merit in the afterlife. From the 4th to the 14th century, more than 735 caves were carved into a cliff face nine miles outside the town of Dunhuang, at a site known as Mogao ku, “Peerless Caves,” or “caves without equal” and the name is fitting. Other cave sites are found in Central Asia, but nowhere can you find such a large number of caves – some 492 caves - elaborately decorated with Buddhist sculpture and paintings, some 45.000 square meters of wall paintings and over 2,000 sculptures.

For more than a millennium, as long as the Silk Road thrived, the oasis town of Dunhuang flourished.

However, after the mid- 14th century when the Mongol empire broke up, the overland silk route was no longer safe, so trade shifted to sea routes and Dunhuang was abandoned. The vast quantity of wall painting and sculpture lay largely undisturbed. What accounts for their rediscovery at the turn of the 20th century?

An astonishing discovery took place at Dunhuang on June 22, 1900, when Wang Yuanlu, a resident Taoist monk, found a hidden library of over 40,000 Buddhist silk banners and sutras, paintings, embroideries and documents of all kinds. That small cave is now known as the Library Cave or Cave 17.

Precisely why these documents were hidden in the early 11th century is not known, but one credible theory is that it was sealed to protect the sacred Buddhist texts from destruction by Islamic forces which, at the time, were threatening the Buddhist city-states of Central Asia.



As you enter the area of the caves, you will see the main building, which houses a 34.5 meter (about 110 feet) Maitreya Buddha.

The Library Cave and its contents were discovered when the Qing dynasty was collapsing so officials took little interest; however, foreign explorers, sometimes referred to as “devils of the silk road,” hearing of the fantastic discovery, gravitated to Dunhuang in search of treasure. Among the most famous are Sir Aurel Stein, a British archaeologist-explorer, and Paul Pelliot,



The Mogao Caves Near Dunhuang. These Caves are also Known as the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas

a Frenchman who both spoke and read Chinese. Now the contents of Cave 17 are widely dispersed, most notably the Stein collection in England and India, and the Pelliot collection in France.

If you are interested in the intriguing tales about these explorers, I recommend reading Peter Hopkirk's *Foreign Devils of the Silk Road*, as well as his other publications. Or, better yet, search online for the International Dunhuang Project, which offers, free of charge, information about the Library Cave and the objects found there. One of the most notable objects found in the Library Cave is the Diamond Sutra; dated 868, it is the world's earliest dated woodblock printed book.

Today Dunhuang is well managed by the Dunhuang Academy under the direction of Fan Jinshi, who has spent almost 50 years at Dunhuang. An archaeologist and authority on Dunhuang, Director Fan, together with the professional staff at the Dunhuang Academy, ensures that the caves and their art are studied, digitized and preserved, maintaining the highest international standards.

In terms of the art, the caves and their Buddhist imagery, both painting and sculpture, varies greatly in scale and style. Among the largest are two monumental seated Tang dynasty Buddhas in Cave 96 (34.5 meters high) and Cave 130 (27 meters high). From flying celestial beings of the richly decorated ceilings to tales of the former lives of the Buddha to sculptures of

Buddhas and bodhisattvas, the art of Dunhuang is overwhelmingly engaging and ethereal.

The most pressing question is how to preserve this great repository of early Chinese art. Now that Dunhuang has an airport, over 500,000 visitors come every year. A new Visitor Center will open in 2013/14, and offer a film and digital domes to educate visitors prior to seeing the caves firsthand. I chair the Dunhuang Foundation which helps raise funds in the US for the Visitor Center and other projects to ensure the preservation of Dunhuang, including training Chinese wall painting conservators in the most up to date techniques of mural painting conservation and scientific analysis.

To fully appreciate this extraordinary site of Dunhuang and its splendid art, you need to experience it firsthand. Make the trip and you will find the journey unforgettable.

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Mimi Gates has been Director Emerita of the Seattle Art Museum for fifteen remarkable years (1994-2009). Mimi Gates is a scholar of Asian art with a B.A. from Stanford University in Asian

History; M.A. in Oriental and Chinese Studies from the University of Iowa; and Ph.D. in Art History from Yale University. Prior to moving to Seattle, she was at the Yale University Art Gallery, where she was Curator of Asian Art (1975-1986) and subsequently promoted to Director (1987-1994).

Dr. Gates previously served as President of the Association of Art Museum Directors and chaired the Federal Indemnity Panel (1999 - 2002) at the National Endowment for the Arts. She is currently a member of the Governing Board of the Yale University Art Gallery and a fellow of the Yale Corporation and chair of The Dunhuang Foundation.



the Dunhuang Academy



Fan Jinshi

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