
Conservation of Ancient Sites on the Silk Road

Edited by Neville Agnew

The Getty Conservation Institute
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The Getty Conservation Institute
Los Angeles
The Getty Conservation Institute works internationally to advance conservation and to enhance and encourage the preservation and understanding of the visual arts in all of their dimensions—objects, collections, architecture, and sites. The Institute serves the conservation community through scientific research; education and training; field projects; and the dissemination of the results of both its work and the work of others in the field. In all its endeavors, the Institute is committed to addressing unanswered questions and promoting the highest possible standards of conservation practice.
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The Getty Conservation Institute and the Dunhuang Academy, with the endorsement of China’s State Administration of Cultural Heritage (SACH), have traveled a long road together, one that began in January 1989 with a formal agreement between the institutions concerned. Since that time, our collaborative activities have included the first Silk Road conference, “Conservation of Ancient Sites on the Silk Road,” held in 1993; development of China ICOMOS’s “Principles for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China”; a multiyear wall painting conservation project at the Mogao grottoes; a master’s degree course in wall painting conservation, collaboratively organized with the Dunhuang Academy, Lanzhou University, and the Courtauld Institute of Art; and a visitor management and carrying-capacity plan for the fragile cave temples at Mogao.

It therefore gives me great pleasure to write the foreword to this publication of the papers from the second Silk Road conference, held at the Mogao grottoes in 2004. There has been a rich and dynamic interchange of expertise between SACH, the Dunhuang Academy, and the GCI over the two decades of our collaboration. SACH and the Dunhuang Academy have also generously provided resources that have advanced our ability to work in China. Reciprocally, the GCI has hosted visiting staff from both organizations, including participation in some of the GCI’s other overseas activities, such as the Queens Valley project in Egypt.

Since the first Silk Road conference was held, an important aspect of our collaborative work has centered on wall painting conservation, with focus on cave 85 at the Mogao site, a splendid cave temple dating from the late Tang dynasty. This work is summarized in these conference proceedings as a series of papers, intended to establish a methodological yardstick for future research and conservation treatment of the extraordinarily beautiful—yet threatened and delicate—paintings and polychrome sculpture at Mogao and other, similar Silk Road sites.

Lest anyone imagine otherwise, it is not always easy working and collaborating across barriers of language and culture. What is the “glue” that holds together a partnership such as the one that we have enjoyed with our partners in China? Succinctly stated, it is a combination of clearly defined roles and responsibilities, and common objectives. For his work on this volume and his decades-long leadership of the GCI’s work in China, I thank Neville Agnew, whose extraordinary professionalism and dedication have been central to our successful partnerships in China. I am most grateful to Fan Jinshi, director of the Dunhuang Academy, and Zhang Bai, deputy director of SACH, for their lasting friendship and commitment to the conservation of China’s remarkable heritage. They have been instrumental in making the GCI-China partnership the longest enduring collaboration of the Getty Conservation Institute. Now in the midst of our seventh three-year agreement with SACH at the Dunhuang Academy, we look forward to new challenges, as new opportunities beckon in our future work together.

Timothy P. Whalen
Director
The Getty Conservation Institute
S
ince the first Silk Road conference was held at the Mogao
Grottoes in 1993, great changes have taken place—
first, new construction and better facilities for visitors
and personnel; and second, the professional development of
Dunhuang Academy conservation staff. The site has become
more accessible with expansion of the local airport, and visi-
tor numbers have increased, at times beyond the capacity of
management to cope. Mogao has continued to attract scholars
who study the iconography of the wall paintings and statuary
and the ancient documents from the famed Library Cave; it
has developed expertise in site conservation, management,
and presentation; and it has become recognized as a center of
excellence in China. This has not been without some cost to
the site, however, as greater burden has been placed on staff
through demands for the expertise of the Dunhuang Academy
to assist less-well-established organizations elsewhere in
China in conserving their sites. Perforce, the Dunhuang
Academy has had to divert some of its own fully extended
personnel to undertake conservation projects elsewhere in
China and in other Asian countries as well while serving in an
advisory role to a number of national initiatives in conserva-
tion. Balancing these requests with the many urgent needs
of the Mogao Grottoes and the two other sites, Yulin and the
Western Grottoes, under the Dunhuang Academy’s manage-
ment and conservation jurisdiction has been no easy matter.
Fortunately, Director Fan Jinshi, whose life has been devoted
to the site, has kept an unclouded vision and maintained her
priorities for Mogao.

This publication, an outcome of the Second International
Conference on the Conservation of Grotto Sites, has appeared
more than a decade after the first. While the first conference
essentially focused on managerial and technical conservation,
the scope of the second was expanded to include art historical
and related topics, though, as can be seen in the table of con-
tents, the emphasis has remained primarily conservation. The
purpose of addressing a larger subject matter has been to seek
greater inclusivity and to build bridges between conservation
and scholarly research on the history of the Mogao Grottoes
and the Silk Road in its vast geographic reach. Moreover,
because Mogao is a site in the top echelon of significance
among China’s extensive list of World Heritage Sites and a
pivotal one along the ancient Silk Road trade routes, it was
thought important in the spirit of exchange between East and
West to seek participation from other central Asian coun-
tries. This was not entirely successful, but the gesture was
made; Kyrgyzstan delegates participated in the event, and
Uzbekistan contributors submitted their papers, which are
included in this publication.

As stated in the preface to the first Silk Road confer-
ence proceedings, the collaboration between the Dunhuang
Academy and the Getty Conservation Institute addressed
broad site-wide issues of conservation at Mogao. In the pres-
cent volume the work undertaken since the first conference
is presented. These joint efforts reflect, we believe, the far
greater synergy that can be generated when partners work
together in mutual trust and understanding on problems
and issues of common interest.

Looking back, both sides embarked together on ambi-
tious undertakings that include, with the support of the State
Administration of Cultural Heritage of China, participation
in developing the Principles for the Conservation of Heritage
Sites in China in partnership with the Australian Heritage
Commission; drafting a master plan for the site; research,
testing, and conservation of cave 85; and initiation of a

Preface
master’s degree course in the conservation of wall paintings through a four-way partnership between Lanzhou University (the degree-conferring institution), the Dunhuang Academy, the Courtauld Institute of Art in London, and the Getty Conservation Institute.

Areas of acute need identified in the master plan were also addressed, including a use plan, a visitor management subplan, and a visitor carrying capacity study for the cave temples open to the public. Visitation to the site and increasing visitor numbers represent a dire threat. Unless a cap on visitor numbers, backed by sound research, is implemented as a policy of the Dunhuang Academy, the site will be degraded by overuse and commercial pressures.

Translation between Chinese and English, as always, proved a challenge: both languages, of course, have subtleties and nuances that tax the most expert of translators. Add to these the specialized terminology of conservation, scientific and technical terms, and geographic place-names—to mention but a few—and the problem is compounded.

Many colleagues have striven greatly, as acknowledged elsewhere, to bring this long-delayed publication to fruition. We hope it may prove of value well beyond the confines of the Mogao Grottoes.

Neville Agnew
Acknowledgments

The Second International Conference on the Conservation of Grotto Sites was a collaborative undertaking of the Getty Conservation Institute and the Dunhuang Academy, with the approval of China's State Administration of Cultural Heritage. The director of the Dunhuang Academy, Fan Jinshi, was an enthusiastic proponent of the event from the first, as was Tong Mingkang, deputy director of the State Administration. Timothy P. Whalen, director of the GCI, likewise endorsed the suggestion of a second conference as a milestone in these institutions' long-standing joint conservation and management planning efforts at the Mogao Grottoes.

It is appropriate to recognize the work of Su Bomin, at the Dunhuang Academy, who undertook arrangements on the Chinese side, and Kathleen Louw, at the GCI, who provided efficient logistical and planning support. Preparation of the manuscript for publication of the proceedings has been a collaborative effort of many colleagues, though an onerous one. Special thanks are due to Elizabeth Maggio, who coedited many of the papers and whose exacting standard has set the tone for the volume. Foremost among the many difficulties has been the challenge of translation from the Chinese. It is not the editor's purpose here to recount the tribulations of attempting to wrestle with the often-inscrutable English in some of the translations that were submitted, or to comment, other than in passing, on manuscripts with incomplete or missing references, but rather to gratefully express appreciation for the unstinting help of colleagues. Po-Ming Lin should be acknowledged first; it was he who spent countless hours on the telephone and via email communicating with authors in an attempt to clarify points of meaning. His was the patience of Job. Peter Barker likewise was generous with his time and perseverance in attempting to unravel the often highly technical language and terminology. Po-Ming and Peter worked together, consulting with each other and frequently seeking clarification from other Chinese speakers at the Getty Conservation Institute, notably Ye Wa and Zhang Liangren, when their expertise was relevant to the subject matter. Jonathan Bell reviewed certain papers and clarified Buddhist terminology in cases where transliteration from the Chinese resulted in inconsistency with commonly recognized English translation (usually based on the Sanskrit term), Lorinda Wong assisted with a number of papers on wall painting conservation, and Martha Demas repeatedly provided useful counsel on matters of content. In the final throes of editing, Valerie Greathouse and Cameron Trowbridge of the GCI's Information Center reviewed bibliographic citations, completing some, finding others; the institute is fortunate in having staff who, undaunted, tackle such tasks with humor and a sense of challenge. An immense debt of gratitude is due to them.

Getty Publications has been forbearing in the long, often-stalled editorial process, and we are indebted also to Tevvy Ball, Sheila Berg, and Ann Lucke for their patience and their meticulous standards in the handling and copyediting of the manuscript. As always, the designers at Getty Publications have produced an elegant volume appropriate to the art of the site.

Beverly Weisblatt handled the manuscript flow and tracked versions as they were transmitted back and forth between the editors and the authors; her help was essential.
throughout the process. Cynthia Godlewski managed efficiently, and with her characteristic tact, all communication and transmission of the final manuscripts to Getty Publications for copyediting, design, and production.

To all of the above we are most grateful.

To those authors who submitted in a timely manner and whose manuscripts were complete and intelligible, we apologize for the delay in seeing the work in print; we hope, despite the protracted process, that this volume will prove to have been worth the wait.

Neville Agnew
Mogao satellite image.
Satellite image courtesy of Digital Globe.
Inset photo by G. Aldana © J. Paul Getty Trust
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