



A Preliminary Study of Dunhuang Wall Paintings in the Prosperous Time of Tang Dynasty: A Case Study of "The Sutra of Contemplation Amtayus" Murals

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DOI: 10.32629/asc.v3i3.925

Abstract: The Dunhuang murals of the flourishing period of Tang Dynasty (Sheng Tang) have 20 surviving murals of "The sutra of contemplation Amtayus". In this paper, I will use Mr. Shi Weixiang's three-stage classification of Dunhuang murals in the flourishing period of Tang Dynasty as the basis for the description and analysis of the representative murals of "The sutra of contemplation Amtayus", and summarize the characteristics and artistic achievements of Dunhuang murals in the Sheng Tang.

Keywords: space, color, jiehua, landscape painting, figure painting

Introduction

As an important part of the history of Chinese art, Sheng Tang period can best reflect the aesthetic connotation of Chinese culture. As a student of the department of murals, the discussion on the individuality of the theme murals named "The sutra of contemplation Amtayus" in Dunhuang Sheng Tang period helps me to understand the artistic commonness and spiritual connotation contained in them.

1. Briefly describe the representative murals in the three phases of Dunhuang frescoes in Sheng Tang with the theme of "The sutra of contemplation Amtayus"

1.1 Phase I-705 AD-712 AD - Cave 217

The north wall of Cave 217 is covered with "The sutra of contemplation Amtayus". This mural was the first in the Sheng Tang period to combine the "Moksha Grudge", the "Sixteen Meditations" and the "Pure Land of Amitabha" to form a "triptych" combination of mural subjects. The use of color throughout the mural is magnificent and unusual, with strong contrasts between earth red and green, extremely decorative. The relationship between the figures and the building is distinct, with Amitabha standing out with its large area of light green backlight against the dark green eaves and red pillars of the temple. The layout of the figures is also based on the Chinese painting style of "the main is large and the subordinate is small," with Amitabha occupying the center of the figure, surrounded by Bodhisattvas on his left and right, and much smaller than Amitabha. To the east of the "Pure Land of Amitabha" is the "Sixteen Meditations" and to the west of it is the "Moksha Grudge".

1.1.1 The architectural depiction (Jiehua) is quite beautiful

The spatial perspective of the buildings has made full progress compared to the previous generation of murals, but this painting of "The sutra of contemplation amtayus" focuses more on the coordination of the buildings with the picture and the impression it gives to the viewer. The pavilions and temples are interspersed by colorful clouds and apsaras, the clear sky painted in green sets off the flying ribbons, with the unique ridge decoration (Chiwen) and Buddhist pagodas of the Tang Dynasty architecture, making the picture more spatially rich. The through canal runs through the picture and connects the various water pavilions. The entire complex is centered on the central axis where Amitabha is located, and the building system is spread out on the wall, giving a sense of grandeur.

1.1.2 The gods and Buddhas are each in their own mood

The figures in Cave 217, "The sutra of contemplation Amtayus" are each in a different mood. Amitabha in the center has a high nose and deep eyes, long narrow eyelids, a compassionate gaze, eyebrows like willow leaves, and a rounded face in a square shape. The two sides of his cheeks, forehead, eye sockets, the lower edge of his lips, neck, the junction of neck and chest, and the hollows of his muscles all show traces of reddish-brown staining, and the upper end of his eyebrows are also stained with green close to the shape of his eyebrows, making the figure three-dimensional and dignified. The Bodhisattvas at

the front on both sides stand in a small "s"-like curve with their eyes looking down at the band, while the Bodhisattvas at the back have their weight slightly backward and look at each other. The two "nine-ranked Buddhas" on either side of the picture are marching toward the center, while the "Avatar Bodhisattva" applies the "Seal of meeting the wishes" with his hands and gazes downward in silence. In the center of the dance floor, the "Jiyue" (a traditional deity who control the celestial) is graceful, and the ribbon seems to be unaffected by gravity, floating in the air. On the east side, the "Sixteen Meditations" of Mrs. Wittig's "Treasure Pond Contemplation" is depicted as a Tang Dynasty noblewoman with a plump and delicate face and a deep and serene gaze.

1.1.3 There are strong color contrasts and rich layers of the same color

The large red color of the temple railings, water pavilion fence, Amitabha's clothes, and Bodhisattva's lower skirt are contrasted with the light green backlight of the deity and Buddha, and the light green color of the sky and pool water. Dark green tiles, and the character costumes, the backlight of the gods and Buddhas of light cyan, pond water and sky of flavor cyan, making the same color layer change rich.

1.2 Phase2 Kaiyuan period -713 AD - 755 AD - Cave 320

The north wall of Cave 320 also uses a "triptych" layout to represent the subject matter of "The sutra of contemplation Amtayus". The "Moksha Grudge" and the "Sixteen Views" are symmetrically placed in the center of the large "Pure Land Transformation". The "Pure Land Transformation" picture is fresh and elegant, the figures' movement are reasonable, the architecture is no longer grand but graceful and tranquil, and the whole picture is enveloped by a calm atmosphere. The two sides of the painting, "Moksha Grudge" and "Sixteen Meditations", are both elegantly drawn and moving.

1.2.1 The style of the buildings in the picture(Jiehua) is fresh

The buildings in Cave 320, "The sutra of contemplation Amtayus", are clear, simple, and elegant compared to the buildings in Cave 217. The entire complex is like a quiet courtyard that exists in reality. When the painter represents the temple, he no longer stands the crimson building pillars, leaving space between the building structures instead of rendering them in dark cyan, the buildings are more airy and more lifelike, as if they are not immortal halls but quiet courtyards in real life in line with the aesthetics of the scholars and literary giants. The tiles of the temple are outlined with double lines of ink and rendered in dark green. And the ridge is not outlined, but with a clear light green painted directly out of shape, clear and unusual, as if constructed of jade. The water pavilion and dance pond are also simple and graceful, in line with perspective.

1.2.2 The figures are elegant, with a sense of movement and stillness

Most of the figures in Cave 320, "Amitabha Pure Land Transformation," have a quiet inner quality. For example, the central figure of Amitabha has a long, round, square face, an inverted trapezoid upper body, broad shoulders and a narrow waist, and sits cross-legged on a lotus flower. The decorative patterns of the Buddha's backlight are arranged in an overall upward direction, flourishing like plants in a serene and peaceful atmosphere. This is a far cry from the dignified and robust style of the Buddha's light and the image of Amitabha in Cave 217. The Bodhisattvas on either side also show the dynamic of quietly gazing down, sitting in a serene and feminine posture, as if enveloped in immortal music, not sitting rigidly and straight. The "Contemplative Bodhisattva" on both sides of the picture has one hand on his cheek and one hand on his leg, as if sitting in an open pavilion, being blown by the breeze, showing a meditative and contemplative attitude.

1.2.3 Elegant colors

The picture is unified by the green color, as if the air is all light green. Except for the main position of Amitabha Buddha and his robe, the purity of color used in the painting is high, while the rest of the painting is lightly rendered in cyan, which is elegant. The pond water is not dyed with cyan, but retains the original color of the wall coating, during which it is dotted with cyan lotus leaves and eider ducks swimming in the period. The pool water does not show the characteristics of the northern wall painting in Cave 217 in which the pool water connects the various pavilions, communicating with the front and back of the building, but it looks clear and lovely, imbued with life.

1.3 Phase2 Tianbao period-713 AD - 755 AD - Cave 172 north wall

Cave 172 north wall mural is also painted with "The sutra of contemplation Amtayus", this mural color way similar to the same subject mural in the main room of Cave 320 during the Kaiyuan period, but its composition is different from the same subject mural in Cave 320 and Cave 217, Cave 320 and Cave 217 of the Bodhisattva close to the main Buddha, smaller, to a certain extent, to play a role in supporting the main Buddha, while they and Amitabha formed a unified whole, occupying a larger area in the picture. The "Pure Land Transformation" in Cave 172, however, depicts Amitabha separately from his attendants, who are only slightly smaller than the main Buddha, and the attendants, who were visually located below the lotus seat, are arranged by the artist on either side of the lotus seat, between the main Buddha and the Bodhisattvas.

1.3.1 The composition of the picture has a deep sense of space

The architecture is unified in a profound space, and the spatial construction is extremely innovative. For example, the artist added a water pavilion as a dance pond in front of the "dance pond of Jiyue", on which are painted cranes, peacocks and parrots dancing to the music of the immortals. The buildings on both sides of the central axis are set up with corridors, whose function is similar to that of the canal in Cave 217's "The sutra of contemplation Amtayus", both of which are intended to deepen the space of the picture. The "corridor" is usually used in the construction of traditional Chinese gardens, and its role is not only to provide resting space for visitors, but also to delineate the boundaries of the garden and define the scope of space. The corridor in the painting not only emphasizes the sense of space, but also defines the scope of the "courtyard" to a certain extent, making this immortal building system more similar to the deep house courtyard in the real life. The buildings not only deepen the relationship between the north and south of the picture, but also show the jaggedness of the buildings in the east and west directions, with the "water pavilions and terraces" on the corridor in a staggered manner and the branches of the trees interspersed with them, with a delicate and reasonable spatial layout. The structure of the building is also depicted in greater detail, with the wooden structure under the high eaves being depicted in detail, rather than with fishing net lines as in the 217 cave paintings. The celestial beings over the immortal temple arrive on colored clouds, some already flying above the temple, while others seem to be still flying from afar, and the back-and-forth relationship between the ten gods and Buddhas further deepens the sense of space.

1.3.2 The figures are diverse

The figure of Amitabha is both the same and different from those in Cave 217 and Cave 320, as its face is damaged and unrecognizable due to the age of the image. The head-to-body ratio is similar to that of the Amitabha figure in Cave 320, with the upper body being larger than the lower body. The body block is similar to that of the main Buddha in Cave 217, with the upper and lower body blocks being square and rounded, and the chest cavity being broad and solid. The body shape of the Manjusri and Samantabhadra are similar to that of Bodhisattvas in Cave 320, but their image is more refined, with detailed and beautiful celestial robes and precious beads and crowns. The attendants under the lotus seat of the main Buddha are of different looks, and there are many Western faces among the attendants, such as two red-haired Western figures symmetrically appearing among the supporting Bodhisattvas holding flowers and incense burners near the lotus seat in the front row.

1.3.3 Harmonious and light colors

In this painting, except for a large area of red in the wooden part of the temple, red is rarely used in the rest of the painting, or it can be said that red rarely appears in the form of "surface", but in the form of small "dots" in the picture. The use of light cyan in the picture is also much less, except for the roof of the uppermost layer of the temple, the ridge decorations of the building, the ridge, the lower layer of the lotus seat, and the banana leaves behind the Bodhisattvas, the other parts of the "Pure Land Transformation" use light cyan in a dotted manner. The pond water in the painting is not rendered in light cyan, while the upper edge of the sky is painted in light brown, making the overall color of the picture light and harmonious.

1.4 Phase2- Tianbao 713-755 AD - Cave 172 south wall

The south wall of the main room of Cave 172 is also painted with a pavilion of "The sutra of contemplation Amtayus". The composition and form is basically the same as the north wall. However, the spatial relationship and the character of the figures are different from those painted on the north wall.

1.4.1 Space is not deep enough

Compared with the northern wall, the spatial relationship is not far enough. The lotus seat of Amitabha seems to be very close to the water pond which is in front of it, and the ten divine gods seem to be floating above the temple, rather than coming from far away on colorful clouds to attend the meeting. The pipa, Xiao and drums (They are all Chinese traditional instruments) also seem to be suspended in the air rather than having the distance and proximity of the northern wall murals. The depth of the building is not as deep as the north wall painting building, no corridor is set at the expense of the depth of the building, but the side building (with the hall) next to the two-story attic, the side building to the height of the building than the building which is painted on the north wall.

1.4.2 The figures are graceful and dignified

The figure of Amitabha in the painting differs greatly from that painted on the north wall of Cave 172, and is completely different from those painted in Cave 320 and Cave 217. The backlight of the main Buddha in the painting is plain and quiet, without excessive ornamentation, and the Buddha is clothed in wide robes and large sleeves, with his broad figure hidden through his clothes, showing his gracefulness, elegance and dignity. The Bodhisattvas' backlight is similar to that of the main Buddha, with the shape outlined in ink and light green, and then rendered in light ink and light green within the outlined strokes, making the backlight appear sacred and lining the Bodhisattvas more dignified. The Bodhisattvas under the lotus

seat is similar to the women in the Tang tomb murals of the same period, as if she were a real person, with natural and beautiful dynamics, a rich and graceful face. On the left side of the lotus seat, the supporting Bodhisattva is presented in front of the lotus seat with her left hand holding the lotus, while her right hand is naturally backward, revealing the innocent and delicate nature of a young girl in her movements. On the right side, the Supporting Bodhisattva's neck is slightly stretched forward, and her hands hold lotus to worship the main Buddha. The depiction of her hands is particularly exquisite. Her fingers are white and slender, but there is no lack of flesh feeling. The characters are dynamic and appropriate. The whole aesthetic ideas are very popular in the Tang Dynasty.

1.4.3 The colors are vibrant

The columns of the building are vermilion, the wooden windows of the building and the clothes of the main Buddha are depicted in stone green, and the colors of the whole picture are fresh and vibrant.

1.5 Phase3-756 AD - 781 AD - Cave 194

The north wall of Cave 194 at Dunhuang is painted with a "The sutra of contemplation Amṭayus", which is badly damaged by peeling frescoes, but the stylistic features of this fresco can still be seen in the surviving sections.

1.5.1 The composition is original

In the painting, Amitabha and his attendants are seated on a small platform, and the Bodhisattvas under the lotus seat appear to be swimming in the water on a lotus, rather than gathered in the same water pavilion as in the above cave. The building in the picture has been destroyed and is not visible, but the part of the picture that should have been a pool of water has been transformed into a green meadow with trees in full bloom, making the picture vivid and innovative.

1.5.2 The figures are full of interest

The main Buddha in the painting is robust but not plump, and his gestures are different from those in the other caves, with his hands in front of his chest in a "Teaching seal", his face rounded, his gaze quiet, and his lips round and thick with a slight smile. Bodhisattvas who swim in the pool by lotus also have their own moods and vivid waves. Some of them look at Amitabha with folded hands, some look back, as if they are discussing the Buddha's teachings with their companions, and some look to the left and right and are attracted by other things. The two Bodhisattvas, Manjusri and Samantabhadra, look down benevolently, as if they are watching a group of children playing.

1.5.3 The colors are fresh and vibrant

The light green color of the grass and the reddish-brown color of the Buddha's clothes make the picture vibrant and not crowded. The backlight is not finely depicted but painted with light green and red-brown, all of which make the picture refreshing and moving without being overly elaborate.

1.6 Phase3-756 AD - 781 AD - Cave 148

The east wall of Cave 148 at Dunhuang is painted with a picture of "The sutra of contemplation Amṭayus". The way it deals with a sense of spatial depth is similar to the northern wall of Cave 172, with a lot of water pavilions and architectural corridors to advance the space. The whole picture is thick with scenery and cascading buildings. It is worth noting that the Tantric Buddhist mural "Paradise of Pharmacists" on the south side of the east wall uses the same composition and layout as "The sutra of contemplation Amṭayus" with the "Sixteen Meditations" and the "Moksha Grudge" on both sides of the "Pure Land Transformation".

1.6.1 The composition is distinctive

Although the building space is similar to the north wall mural of Cave 172, the bottom of the central axis of the picture does not have a water pavilion, but leaves a large area to show the limpid pond. Over the temple is painted with "Ten Divine gods", the space is slightly congested, and the open pool below forms a sharp contrast, the composition is slightly top-heavy. The water pavilion in the center (where the Amitabha is located) is also depicted as very crowded, with the gods and Buddhas gathered together like a wall that is impermeable. The overall feeling is rather depressing.

1.6.2 The figures are close to those in the "Paradise of Pharmacists"

The backlight of the main Buddha is elaborately ornate, with a solemn face and a large head weight, and the hand seals are the same as those of Amitabha in Cave 194, but they are not spacious enough and are slightly stiff. The backlight of Manjusri and Samantabhadra are also magnificent, and their seated posture are similar to that of the Bodhisattvas in Cave 172, but they appear somewhat dull and shorter than the Bodhisattvas in Cave 172, with the characteristics of Tantric Buddhist murals, and very similar to the figures in the "Paradise of Pharmacists" in the south of the east wall. The attendant Bodhisattvas are gathered under the lotus seat, with rich dynamic changes but lacking a sense of movement and liveliness. The figures are arranged throughout the picture wherever there is a building, and the numerous and dense figures deepen the anxiety of the viewer.

1.6.3 Richness of the same color scale

Cave 172 with the same theme in the frescoes of the pool water to retain the original color of the wall coating staff without rendering, while Cave 148 in the frescoes of the pool water with fine lines, blue rendering, the water waves raised using light cyan while the water waves depressed using dark cyan, blue, lapis lazuli depiction, the water waves flowing between the visible Chinese lotus floating on top of the pool water.

2. “Jiehua” in Sheng Tang "The sutra of contemplation Amtayus" painting

2.1 Creating a sense of space with “Jiehu”

“Jiehu” in the frescoes of the Sheng Tang period's "The sutra of contemplation Amtayus" theme are very different from the building complex depicted in the Dunhuang frescoes of the early Tang Dynasty, whose role is no longer limited to decorating the picture, setting off the characters, and constructing the spatial relationship of the picture has also become the main task of the boundary paintings. The hall of immortals in Cave 45 of the Kaiyuan Cave of the Sheng Tang is very characteristic, with the corridor zigzagging down from the hall of immortals, making downward -curved, spreading to the water pavilion. Cave 172, the north wall and Cave 148 in "The sutra of contemplation Amtayus" frescoes are set up triple water pavilion and set up a "courtyard corridor", rich and far-reaching space.

2.2 Using “Jiehua” to enhance the atmosphere of the picture

The courtyard in the two "The sutra of contemplation amtayus" paintings on the north and south walls of Cave 172 is fresh and tranquil, with no overly decorative buildings and a simple use of color, as if Amidas are in an real courtyard. Cave 217, built during the Jinglong period, is one of the representative caves of the early Sheng Tang period , and its architecture is decorated with beautiful and warm colors, using vermilion, dark red, light green, and dark green glazed bricks to construct the immortal palace. The building in the painting has a majestic form, with green and black roof tiles, four open wings and gentle folding, as if the immortal temple is a hundred feet high, solemn and dignified, and "Flying apsaras" is visible during the shuttle, the picture is solemn and dynamic because of the background of the building.

3. The landscape painting in "The sutra of contemplation amtayus" of the Sheng Tang

3.1 Composition

The landscapes in the "Sixteen Meditations" and "Moksha Grudge" on the north wall of Cave 320 are representative of the way they are composed, similar to the "Spring Tour" by Zhan Ziqian. Zhan Ziqian's "Spring Tour" depicts mountains and rivers from a large overhead perspective, with the mountains stretching upward at a 45-degree angle, with a wide field of view and an endless river. In Cave 320, in the scene of "Sun Meditation" the artist also uses an overhead perspective for the composition, and although the view is not as wide as in Zhan Ziqian's "Spring Tour" ,the mountains to the left of the figure also slope upward at a 45-degree angle, and the dividing line between the fields and the wood in the painting also slopes at a 45-degree angle, with the Mrs.Wittig in proper proportion, not appearing to be larger than the trees or larger than the mountains, and the picture appears deep and long. The north wall of Cave 172, "Sun Meditation" ,is similar to the one in Cave 320, but the 45-degree dividing line between the field and the trees is replaced by a winding river. The central "Pure Land Transformation" on the north wall also has 45-degree upward sloping rivers and sloping banks on both sides of the fairy hall, but their role is similar to that of the dividing lines, both of which are compositional means of advancing spatial relationships.

3.2 Brushwork and color

Cave 217, "The sutra of contemplation Amtayus" was painted in the early Sheng Tang period, and its proportional relationship to the human and landscape is similar to that of the early Tang landscape paintings, as seen in the "Sixteen Meditations", where the size of Mrs.Wittig is similar to that of the mountains and gullies. However, the brushwork and the shape of the trees are different from those in the early Tang murals. In contrast to the landscape painting Cave 209, the landscape in Cave 217, "Sixteen Meditations" is decorative but also serves to divide the space, and its mountain form is gradually maturing, with the hills and ravines outlined in ink and lightly stroked, the reverse side of the mountains painted in ochre and the sunny side in green, the rocks and trees each with their own texture, and the shrubs on the hills painted in a similar way to the bushes in Zhan Ziqian's "Spring Tour". The trees in the northern wall of Cave 172, "Sun Meditation" , are similar to the trees in the "Spring Tour", in which the cliffs are painted in ochre, the stone surfaces are three-dimensional and

varied, and the grassy slopes are painted in green, so the painting is fresh and natural.

3.3 Landscape painting pays more attention to atmosphere

Landscape painting is not a separate section in the Dunhuang caves, but its cooperation with story painting and Buddhist painting enhances the sense of atmosphere. The landscapes in Cave 172 and 320, north wall, "Sun Meditation" painting make the scenes of Mrs. Wittig's "contemplation" resemble realistic scenes of contemplation. The Lady Wittig, with her hands folded sitting under the cliff, looks towards the distant mountains and the setting sun, and in front of her are long stretches of grass and wide rivers.

4. Figure painting in "The sutra of contemplation Amtayus" of the Sheng Tang period

4.1 Rhythm

The figures in "The sutra of contemplation amtayus" of the Sheng Tang have a sense of music rhythm, whether they are Amitabha sitting cross-legged, a Bodhisattva, or apsaras dancing in a dance pond. On the north wall of Cave 172, Amitabha is seated cross-legged on a lotus seat, his hands applying seals, and his robe is raised with his small arms to create a sense of flowing water waves. In the mural of the north wall of Cave 320, Samantabhadra has silver hair on his head, wearing a fine gauze, which hangs down between his legs. The shoulders and arms of the Bodhisattva are half hidden in the fine gauze, and his hands are folded. He leans on the lotus flower with his upper body slightly backward and his head slightly forward. Although he is sitting still, he is dynamic and subtle, and lines which are used to create this Bodhisattva are smooth and elegant, concise and vivid, similar to Wu Daozi's painting style. In the south wall of Cave 172, there are two apsaras dancing with immortal music on the dance floor, one of them with a drum tied around his waist, the other doing a "Playing Pipa behind" posture, dancing lightly, rotating and moving around in a flexible and delicate manner.

4.2 Realism

The characters in "The sutra of contemplation amtayus" of the Sheng Tang have rich sense of reality. The immortal deities in the frescoes look like real people, such as the Western image of the Bodhisattva under the lotus seat of Amitabha on the north wall of Cave 172, snow-white complexion, thick eyebrows and high nose, red hair down to the shoulders, is the real image of the painter located in Shazhou (Dunhuang), a border area of the Tang Dynasty can see. While the Amitabha and his attendant Bodhisattva in Cave 148 are slightly stiff, the immortals and Bodhisattvas in the corridors of the buildings and on the bridges are dynamic and natural, just like the real servants of the Tang palace.

Conclusion

The wall painting of "The sutra of contemplation Amtayus" in Sheng Tang has certain innovative achievements in composition, color and image depiction, etc. The style of different pictures is different and interesting, and the two "The sutra of contemplation Amtayus" pictures of the same period will also show different ambience. Each fresco is unique and has the common atmosphere of Tang art.

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