

# Exploring Narrative Techniques and Artistic Expression in the Buddhist Murals of the Mogao Caves

Kong Wing Huen

Shenzhen College of International Education, Shenzhen, China

**Abstract.** The Mogao Grottoes, a renowned collection of Buddhist caves and murals in Dunhuang, China, are home to some of the most remarkable murals depicting Buddhist stories. This paper aims to explore how Buddhist stories are narrated in the murals of the Mogao Grottoes, focusing on the interplay between visual storytelling, iconic symbolization, and historical context. The research methods used in the study combine art historical analysis, iconographic methods, and literature review. Through detailed analysis of selected representative murals and previous works on the murals, it explores the methods used by artists to communicate complex religious narratives, investigating the role of symbolism, color, and compositional arrangement of scenes. The research concludes that the murals of the Mogao Grottoes act as dynamic and distinct mediums that engage and educate viewers in a spiritual process.

**Keywords:** Mogao Grottoes, Buddhist Murals, narrative techniques, artistic expression, art historical analysis, iconographic methods.

## 1. Introduction

The Mogao Grottoes, also known as the Thousand Buddha Caves, represent one of the most significant artistic and cultural sites in China. Located in the arid region of Dunhuang along the ancient Silk Road, the caves contain a vast collection of murals and sculptures that span over a millennium, from the 4th to the 14th century (Fan & Ma, 1983). These murals serve as an invaluable record of Buddhist thought, practice, and artistic evolution. Among the most striking features of these murals are their vivid depictions of Buddhist stories, ranging from the life of the Buddha to various Jataka tales, and teachings of Mahayana Buddhism (He, 1982). These narratives, conveyed through visual means, were designed to educate and inspire both lay and monastic audiences.

The meaning and significance of this research lies in understanding how these murals narrate Buddhist stories and teachings (He, 1986). As visual texts, the murals transcend language barriers, offering a powerful form of communication that connects diverse audiences across centuries. The study of these murals not only deepens our understanding of Buddhist iconography but also contributes to broader debates in art history, religious studies, and cultural heritage preservation. By examining these narratives in their historical and cultural context, we gain insight into the ways in which Buddhism was communicated and adapted to different social and political contexts over time. This paper adopts a multi-disciplinary research method, combining art historical analysis, iconographic studies, and textual comparison (He, 1994). Through a detailed examination of select murals, this study explores how visual elements such as composition, color, and symbolism are employed to tell complex Buddhist stories. The primary content of the paper focuses on key themes including the life of the Buddha, Jataka stories, and other Buddhist allegories, analyzing the shifts in narrative style across different periods of the grottoes' creation.

The aim of this research is to discuss the ways in which Buddhist stories are visually narrated in the Mogao Grottoes, revealing how these murals functioned as both spiritual instruction and artistic expression. By uncovering the intricate relationship between art, iconography, and religious narrative, the paper seeks to contribute to a deeper appreciation of the artistic and cultural heritage of the Mogao Grottoes and their role in the transmission of Buddhist teachings.

## 2. Literature Review

In the field of Mogao art, many scholars have conducted research on the murals (Jing, 2024). For example, In Shizhe He's work *Visualisation of Vimalakirti Sutra in the Murals of the Mogao Grottoes of Dunhuang*, he mainly explores the different portrayals of the sutra in different mural works, as well as the difference between presentations of the sutra within different time periods and artists, comparing and contrasting the murals on the same topic (Liu, 1995). He's analysis in this work provide abundant information in historical analysis of the *Visualisation of Vimalakirti Sutra*, put more focus on the content analysis under historical context, while focusing rather less on the detailed analysis of the narrative techniques of specific murals. Therefore, the paper will focus on the perspective of artistic techniques and focus more on the content of the murals, while blending contextual analysis. The work will offer more insight into the comparisons of Buddhist murals portraying different topics, which will supplement the existing research gaps.

## 3. Case Analysis

The analysis of cases will be mainly focused on visualization sutras. To begin with, the sutra belongs to the category of visualization sutra, which literally means to illustrate the content of the sutra in the form of paintings. Different from Jakata, karma and Buddhist story paintings popular in the Northern Dynasty, they were intended to teach and preach the true meaning of the sutras to believers, especially for the ones who could not read. Although the main themes of the visualization sutras do not differ a lot, within the different narrative methods, such as composition and symbolic imagery, distinct stories were told. To demonstrate how the narrative techniques convey the Buddhist stories, Specific examples of murals in Mogao Caves are picked to elaborate and analyze (Ning & Hu, 1986).

The first example is the mural located on the south wall of Cave 112, which is also one of the most famous murals in the Mogao Caves, portraying the *Amitayurdhyana Sutra*. Amitayus, referring to the term "the Buddha of infinite life", is a synonymous figure with the well-known Amitabha Buddha, as they are essentially different aspects of the same figure. Amitayus emphasizes the Buddha's attribute of boundless longevity, while Amitabha, with the meaning of "infinite light", emphasizes the Buddha's infinite wisdom. The *Amitayurdhyana Sutra* portrays the image of the Sukhavati (Western Pure Land), which highlights the promise of eternal life. The content of the sutra portrays the Sukhavati in the following words: ".....The Buddha's brow shone, and the light was golden, shining all over the infinite world, turning into a golden stage above the Buddha, from which all the Buddhas and the pure and wonderful land appeared.....The Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, all shining bright, their light golden, shining on the precious trees.....When (the believers) reach the state, the traveller should hear and see the water, light and trees; geese and ducks are all preaching." Generally, the mural portrays the Western Pure Land, which serves as a paradise for those who seek liberation from suffering, aligning with the main aim for Buddhism (Sha, 2011).

Painted in the glorious period of Tang Dynasty, the painting uses vibrant and rich colour made from minerals to demonstrate the prosperity and magnificence of the pure land. With the usage of mineral pigments such as atacamite and cinnabar, the dominant colours in the mural are red and green (Li, 2002). In the mural, the color green is mainly used in painting the water and lotus leaves, the brightness and high saturation vividly highlights the naturality and fertility, while red color is largely used in protraying the clothes of characters in the painting and the celestial buildings, which aligns with the wooden structure of buildings of the time and forms a sense of steadiness and solemnity.

Viewing the mural from a general perspective, the painting applies a symmetrical arrangement of figures, with the Amitayus Buddha in the visual center of the mural, establishing the dominant theme of the mural — the theme of prosperous and boundless life, specifically linked with the setting of the Sukhavati (Proffitt, 2023). Although the figure of the Buddha is largely eroded, it could still be inferred that the Buddha is sitting on a lotus throne with palms together, as if he was praying for the believers who seeks for liberation. This immediately establishes a sense of steadiness and solemnity,

with the Buddha as the focal point of the visualization practice and the supreme guide to the Pure Land. On the Buddha's right- and left-hand side, the bodhisattvas and attendants are located in a symmetrical and radiant order, aligning with the Buddhist theme of balance.

For hierarchical arrangement, the mural employs a top-to-bottom layout to organize space, reflecting and centered on the theme of a heavenly and earthly realm. In the upper section, there are the celestial buildings (Zhang, 2008). In the middle section, Amitabha Buddha and his attending bodhisattvas are also depicted in a hierarchical arrangement, the symmetry in the allocation also reflects on the theme of balance in Buddhism. While in the lower section, there are the dancers, the band and human figures. Some may argue that this arrangement reflects a sense of hierarchy, but from another perspective, it instead emphasizes the aspirational and ascetic journey towards real Buddhism and the realm, that it is an upward journey to reach the spiritual and mental highness like the Buddhas. This is also further highlighter through the dynamic perspective, that the space is layered, creating a sense of depth and a bridge between the human world and the celestial realm. Additionally, the color used in the mural are also deluxe but vivid, representing the vitality and prosperity in the utopian land.

Viewing the mural more detailedly, the elements and symbolic images used in the mural also play an important role in conveying the Buddhist themes.



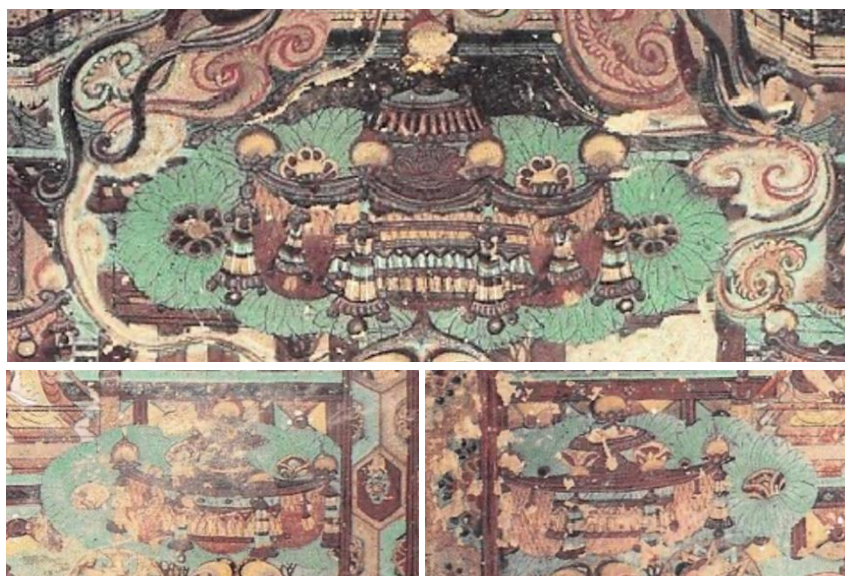
**Figure 1.** Part of the Amitayurdhyana Sutra (a). (Picture credit: Original) Alt Text for the figure:  
The top section of the sutra, portrays the celestial buildings of the Sukhavati.

The first important component of the mural is the celestial buildings, which occupies the upper part of the mural (Figure 1). The ornate structures are depicted in intricate details, including golden roofs, jeweled walls, lights and smoke from burning incense. These elements embody the perfection and prosperity of the Sukhavati, which contrasts with the poverty and imperfections of real life and reinforces the Buddha's wisdom and compassion to create a Pure Land for suffering people.



**Figure 2.** Part of the Amitayurdhyana Sutra (b). (Picture credit: Original) Alt Text for the figure:  
The bottom part of the sutra, portraying the celestial band, dancer and the pool with lotus.

The second part of the mural is the Pipa dancer and the bands (Figure 2). As the bottom part of the mural, the inclusion of the dancer and musicians reflects the joyous and harmonious nature of the Sukhavati, reinforcing its bliss and aesthetic perfection as well. The celestial performances represent the sublimation of worldly desires into spiritual joy, which aligns with Buddhist teachings to find higher level of pleasure through virtuous activities, also highlighting the inclusivity of the Pure Land.



**Figure 3.** Part of the Amitayurdhyana Sutra (c). (Picture credit: Original) Alt Text for the figure: A detail of the sutra, depicting the lotus.

The third essential element of the mural is lotus (Figure 3). From Buddhism perspective, it is believed that the nature of lotuses - growing from muddy water represents people's struggling and suffering in the earthly world, while the flower, with its white and pink color, blooms clean and beautiful, representing that the practitioners has entered a new spiritual and physical state of reborn. The partially and fully bloomed lotus each symbolizes a being progressing, and already attained the spiritual enlightenment, highlighting the obstacles and effort needed to reach spiritual purity through faith, meditation and virtuous deeds, etc. The nature of lotus not only demonstrates the key theme of Buddhism and attributes echoes with the Amitayus Buddha of new and eternal life but also reflects on the aspirational journey of people entering the Amitabha's pure land.

#### 4. Discussion

Overall, the murals of the Mogao Grottoes demonstrate a remarkable integration of Buddhist narrative within the broader framework of Chinese art, functioning not just as religious icons or art pieces but a fusion of the two, acting as cultural treasures that articulate the complexities of Buddhist philosophy and ancient Chinese art. Within the art genre, the presentation of Buddhist stories goes beyond isolated depictions of individual events or figures, instead, with the help of the presentation method of murals and caves, an interconnected system designed to convey the moral teachings and spiritual journeys.

One of the key aspects of the murals is their use of large-scale, panoramic compositions. These expansive depictions are often organized in multi-tiered structures or friezes, which allow for a chronological or thematic unfolding of stories across different scenes, enabling audiences to trace the life progression of the Buddha. For instance, the life of the Buddha is typically depicted in a series of images that not only trace his birth, enlightenment, and death but also illustrate key moral teachings through different episodes. The narrative progression through space mirrors the viewer's own journey through the caves, creating a dynamic, immersive experience that invites reflection on the spiritual narrative.

Additionally, the use of spatial hierarchies and symbolic elements in these murals underscores the layered nature of the Buddhist teachings being presented. Higher altitudes in the murals often depict deities or enlightened beings, symbolizing the path to spiritual ascent, while lower levels tend to focus on human figures, representing the realm of worldly existence. This spatial organization functions as a visual metaphor for the Buddhist cosmology and its emphasis on the transcendence from suffering to enlightenment.

The influence of the Mogao Grottoes on later art, religion, and society is profound and enduring. As one of the most significant Buddhist art complexes in the world, the cave murals shaped not only the artistic traditions of Central Asia and China but also the development of Buddhist visual culture across East Asia. The iconography and narrative techniques seen in the Mogao murals influenced a wide range of religious artworks, from early Chinese Buddhist sculptures to later mural traditions in regions like Korea, Japan, and Tibet.

In the realm of art, the Mogao Grottoes represent a pivotal moment in the evolution of Chinese Buddhist painting. The integration of narrative storytelling with complex iconography in the caves set the stage for later developments in Chinese religious painting, particularly during the Tang and Song dynasties, also demonstrating the intriguing fusion of Chinese and western styles. The use of vibrant colors, intricate details, and sophisticated perspectives in the murals influenced not only religious art but also secular works, contributing to the broader aesthetic development of Chinese painting.

From a religious perspective, the murals helped to establish a visual language for Buddhism that could be understood by people across different social strata, including monks, scholars, and lay practitioners. The visual narration of Buddhist stories served as an accessible medium for communicating doctrinal concepts and moral teachings to a diverse audience. In this way, the Mogao murals played a key role in the spread of Mahayana Buddhism and its philosophical tenets throughout China and beyond, particularly through the Silk Road. The educational impact of the murals ensured that Buddhist teachings were not only preserved but actively disseminated, influencing religious practices and beliefs for generations.

The social impact of the Mogao Grottoes is equally significant. As a focal point for Buddhist image, the caves served as a cultural and spiritual hub where people from various backgrounds could engage with Buddhist teachings. The interaction between different ethnic and cultural groups, facilitated by the Silk Road, brought about a cross-pollination of religious and artistic ideas. This cultural exchange is reflected in the diverse iconographic styles seen in the murals, which blend native Chinese, Indian, and Central Asian influences. The caves thus became a testament to the cosmopolitan nature of Buddhist practice and the role of art in bridging cultural divides.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the art of the Mogao Grottoes serves as a powerful testament to the intertwined nature of art, religion, and society. Through the presentation of Buddhist stories in a visually compelling and spiritually resonant manner, the murals communicated complex teachings and contributed to the region's broader cultural and political dynamics. The legacy of the Mogao Grottoes continues to be felt today, not only as a symbol of China's rich Buddhist heritage but also as an enduring example of the transformative power of art in shaping religious thought and societal values.

The impact of the research is significant, offering a deeper understanding of how Buddhist stories were adapted and represented in art, and how the Mogao Grottoes contributed to the diffusion of Mahayana Buddhism across Central Asia, China, and beyond. The study underscores the importance of visual storytelling in the dissemination of religious and philosophical ideas, highlighting the ways in which art can shape and reflect societal values. Moreover, the research contributes to the broader field of Buddhist art history by offering insights into the narrative techniques and iconographic strategies employed by artists at the Mogao Grottoes.

Looking toward the future, this research opens several avenues for further exploration. While this paper has focused primarily on the thematic and visual aspects of the murals, further studies could delve into the socio-political and economic contexts in which these murals were produced, particularly the role of patronage and cross-cultural exchanges along the Silk Road. Additionally, comparative studies between the murals of the Mogao Grottoes and other Buddhist art traditions—such as those in India, Southeast Asia, and Tibet—would provide a richer understanding of the global impact of Buddhist visual culture. Finally, as the Mogao Grottoes continue to face preservation

challenges, future research could explore innovative methods of conserving these invaluable cultural treasures while ensuring that their religious and artistic significance is maintained for future generations.

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