

EXHIBITIONS IN RETROSPECT

Joachim Meyer and Peter Wandel. *Shahnama: The Colorful Epic about Iran's Past*. Copenhagen: The David Collection, 2016. 210 pp. ISBN 978-87-88464-15-3.

Zhao Feng, ed. *Silks from the Silk Road: Origin, Transmission and Exchange*. Zhejiang: Zhejiang University Press, [vii] + 231 pp. ISBN978-7-308-15089-7.

Neville Agnew, Marcia Reed, and Tevvy Ball. *Cave Temples of Dunhuang: Buddhist Art on China's Silk Road*. Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 2016. xvi + 292 pp. ISBN 978-1-60606-489-4.

Since all three of the exhibitions presented in these fine volumes are now history, it is impossible to review them except retrospectively through the lens of the books and whatever auxiliary materials may be available on the websites of the hosting institutions. I would be the first to advocate actually seeing the material in person, in part because the way it is presented when expertly curated adds immensely to the understanding of any individual object when seen by itself, in a different context or through some print or digital lens. Yet exhibitions do live on through their catalogs, and those catalogs in themselves may provide much which would not have come from what tends, in such museum exhibitions, to be a too brief and one-time walk through the galleries. What then can we who were not privileged to visit the exhibitions learn from these books? I will take them in sequence, saving the Dunhuang exhibition for last, for reasons that should become apparent.

The David Collection in Copenhagen houses one of the best collections of Islamic art anywhere in the world. Here in the *Shahnama*, the curators present the largest special exhibition the museum has mounted to date, drawn, with one exception, from the museum's own holdings. The purpose here is to introduce one of the great classics of world literature, Firdawsi's poetic rendering of Iran's national epic completed in the year 1010, a work too little known outside Iran but which can be brought to life via the vivid illustrations of the text which occupy such an important place in the history of Islamic miniature painting. The David Collection is fortunate to own a representative group of those illustrations, ranging in date from the early 14th century down into modern times and produced across a broad expanse of the Islamic world. Presented here in exquisite color photographs (the work of Pernille Klemp), often with closeup details, the manuscript leaves in many cases may be viewed in or close to their actual size. Facing each of the 55 full-page album leaves is a page with descriptive and analytical text. The catalog is prefaced by several essays, all very clearly written for a general audience. Peter Wandel writes about "The Poem, the Poet and the Work's Lasting Relevance." Joachim Meyer's essay is on the imagery, Claus Valling Pedersen's subject is the place of the text in the literary and political landscape, and lastly, Emil Madsen Brandt contextualizes it in "The Art of Storytelling, and the Iranian Coffeehouse."

As Meyer and Wandel warn us, they have taken some liberties with the text, in that for clarity of exposition they have rearranged some of the original order and focused on

a few of the key characters, thus allowing the uninitiated to obtain a kind of sequential narrative that progresses more or less chronologically from the early kings to the era of the Sasanians. A major section deals with the heroics of Rostam, who fought Iran's enemies and various monsters. One of the important themes, represented in various battle scenes, is the conflict between Iran and Turan, the world of the Turks. Later we meet Iskandar, better known from the Western perspective as Alexander the Great.

For any exhibition, one might reasonably ask to what extent is what it contained still available to view after its doors have closed. In the intimate confines of the David Collection, one would now not be able to see the same sequence all in a single location, since they had to move out temporarily a portion of the museum's also significant collection of modern Danish art to create enough space. (For some photos of the original installation, along with an overview essay and a selected group of the miniatures, go to <http://www.davidmus.dk/en/current_events/tidligere_sauerudstilling/special-exhibition-shahnama>.) However, presumably some of the miniatures still can be seen in the museum's chronologically arranged galleries presenting different periods and regions of Islamic art. For the entire collection, visit the museum's website (<https://www.davidmus.dk/en/collections/islamic/materials/miniatures/art>), where each miniature can be viewed in Pernille Klemp's beautiful photographs and enlarged so as to see even the smallest details. The descriptive texts on the web pages do not replicate those which were written for the exhibition, but they are quite adequate to inform about the significance of each image. Thus, since almost the entire exhibition was from in-house resources, it can be re-assembled after the fact. By presenting its collection in such high resolution images (the website also has accompanying information on dynasties, periods and cultural context), the David Collection is a model for what one hopes, increasingly, other museums will emulate.

The inspiration for mounting an exhibition may vary, with contemporary geo-political and economic concerns sometimes providing impetus and making possible the necessary funding and institutional support. Such seems to have been the case with *Silks from the Silk Road*, mounted in 2015 in Zhejiang (and apparently, repeated later in Qatar), where credit is given at the outset to the Chinese government's initiative of creating a "Silk Road Economic Belt" and promoting the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road." One has been reminded very recently of this initiative by

news reports of the first Chinese train arriving in London after having traversed this new “road.” The underlying idea in the exhibit then was to use the example of textiles to illustrate the historic interactions between China and the West and to mark in addition the inscription of the Silk Road on UNESCO’s World Heritage list. There have been Silk Road exhibitions aplenty over the years, but this one indeed had as its specific focus silk, starting with the evidence for the domestication of silk production in China some 5000 years ago and proceeding (with but a brief modern coda) down through the Tang Dynasty.

The book opens with essays by Rong Xinjiang, “The Silk Road is a Road of ‘Silk,’” in which he deliberately pushes back against alternative designations that emphasize other products as the focus of Eurasian exchange, and by Zhao Feng on the origins of domesticated silk and the development processing and weaving. Rong is one of the most respected historians of the Inner Asian silk roads, and Zhao Feng, who heads China’s National Silk Museum, is generally acknowledged as the leading expert on Chinese silk.

The catalog is loosely organized geographically, moving east to west, but with chronological arrangement of entries within each major section. So we begin with “Origins in the East,” which I found to be of particular interest for its inclusion of some of the earliest archaeological evidence about the domestication of silk production in China, before moving on to examples of silk and Tang Dynasty *mingqi* which show us the clothing made from it. The following section “Opening to the World” introduces exchanges with the “Western Regions” where of particular interest for me are bamboo slips (the Chinese texts translated here) listing post-house distances along the way from Chang’an to Dunhuang. The evidence of the silks themselves indicates that exchange of techniques and styles moved in both directions. The next section focuses specifically on evidence from those “Western Regions” of Inner Asia, many of the excavated examples from well-known sites such as Niya and the Astana Cemetery. We find here our old friend Yingpan Man, and silks from the probably less familiar Dulan cemeteries on the Tibetan plateau. While the Central Asian origin of many of the silks is posited, exactly what that may mean concerning their provenience is left rather vague, and there is practically no suggestion here of there having been a specifically Sogdian silk industry. The final section, “Localization and Diversity” explores further the developing sophistication and integration of different weaving techniques. Much of the material is from documented excavations, about which the individual essays generally tell us quite a bit for context. While many of the examples have been presented in generally accessible previous publications for English-speaking audiences, there is also a lot which may be new to most readers. The exhibition drew on several major collections across China.

The book can stand by itself as an introduction to the subject of Chinese silks. The illustrations are high quality, often with drawings to clarify patterns that may not come across clearly from the photos. The English of the texts is generally very good, occasional lapses being easy enough to decipher. There are good maps on which one can locate all the archaeological sites, and a chronological table of

dynasties and periods. A glossary explains technical terms, with closeup pictures so one can see the weaves and the few examples of the plants which produced the most common dyes.

Those who would wish for more though might consult the encyclopedic *Chinese Silks* (Yale Univ. Pr., 2012), to which Zhao Feng 赵丰 was a major contributor, his earlier *Treasures in Silk* (Hong Kong, 1999), which is organized chronologically and, like the Yale volume, covers additional centuries, and his *Legacy of the Desert King: Textiles and Treasures Excavated at Niya on the Silk Road* (Urumqi and Hangzhou, 2000) with its abundant illustration of the artifacts which were found along with one of the most important collections of well-preserved silk textiles from the Western Regions. As near as I can tell, the exhibition in 2015 has not left a significant presence on the Internet.

My initial immersion in the history of the eastern part of the Silk Roads came not from a focus on silk but rather through the study of Buddhist art at the Mogao Caves outside of Dunhuang, which is located at the far western end of Gansu Province on the edge of the desert. Committed to teaching a course about the silk roads during the following academic year, I took a leap into the unknown and enrolled in a six-week summer institute in 1998 co-sponsored by the Silkroad Foundation and the Dunhuang Academy at Mogao. We had unparalleled opportunities to visit the caves (entering more than 100 of the painted ones and also getting to visit the northern grottoes which apparently had been used as simple residences) and explore the surrounding landscapes, wandering the hills south of the caves and even spending a night at the Guanyin temple atop Sanwei Mountain to their east. A decade later, I was able to spend another few weeks at Mogao in a follow-up program. So the exhibition mounted at the Getty last year naturally was of huge interest to me even though I was unable to attend it.

Given its long association with the Dunhuang Academy in conservation projects and the other resources it has, the Getty was uniquely positioned to be able to mount the first major exhibition specifically focused on Dunhuang (that is, not just treating it as part of the larger Silk Road).¹ Understandably, the emphasis here was not simply on the art of the caves and the artifacts taken away (mostly to Europe) from the “Library Cave” back at the beginning of the 20th century. In fact, artifacts as such, were a relatively small, if essential, part of the exhibition, all of them carefully selected to reveal a great deal about not only Buddhist art, but Buddhist belief and practice. The emphasis on belief and practice is at the forefront of the catalog essay by Hseuh-Man Shen and Mimi Gardner Gates (“The Buddhist Cave Temples of Dunhuang: Art, Spirituality, Cultural Heritage”) which is a model for what catalog essays should do to integrate meaningfully into a coherent introduction key items from the exhibit itself.² I was particularly struck by the inclusion among the objects of two ink altar drawings, one a kind of idealized scheme somewhat resembling a mandala and the other a diagram which indicates the actual placement of ritual objects on and around the altar. What is too often missed when we see images of the caves as they are today is any sense of the ritual context(s) (more than one “functional” designation might have been envisaged by the creators). Some of the earliest photographs of the cave interiors show the altars

still in use, structures, hangings and implements in place, all of which is today gone. Including such a photo here would have complemented nicely the discussion of the 10th-century diagrams. Assuming that the painted banners were often displayed and not merely locked away after acquiring merit for those who sponsored their creation, it also would have been of interest, to have had a reconstruction of how in fact they might have been displayed either within the caves or hanging from their façades.

The individual item descriptions in the catalog (the work of Michelle McCoy) are substantial essays on their own. I had seen some of these items before (see the accompanying page of images). It is impressive that the British Library loaned one of its greatest treasures, the printed copy of the Diamond Sutra, made in the year 868, the earliest complete printed book known (for a photo reproduction of the entire scroll, enlargeable, go to http://www.bl.uk/turning-the-pages/?id=1c92bc7e-8acc-49b3-9a27-b5ad8f44230a&type=sd_planar). A small selection displayed in the British Museum in 2007 in conjunction with a conference sponsored by the International Dunhuang Project included the remarkable embroidered 8th-century image of the "Fanhe Buddha" (Cat. № 10, pp. 204-206) (MAS.o.1129 [Ch.00260]), the scroll with the remarkable landscape paintings that form the backdrop to scenes from the life of the Buddha (Cat. № 13, pp. 210-211) (1919,0101,0.97 [Ch.lv.0012]), the Vajrapani banner (Cat. No. 42, p. 270) (1919,0101,0.132 [Ch.xxiv.002]), the Buddha names sutra (Cat. № 28, pp. 244-245) (BL, OR.8210/S.253), and the banner depicting Avalokiteśvara as Guide to Souls (1919,0101,0.46 [Ch.lvii.003]), analogous to the one loaned for to the Getty (see p. 217). My appreciation of all these has been considerably enhanced now by reading the Getty catalog entries. Would that the Getty post this part of the book in its entirety to its website.

One goal of the exhibition was to provide a meaningful sense of the iconographic context for the drawings, manuscripts and banner paintings. One way to do this is through photography, where the catalog includes abundant high-quality illustrations of cave interiors and details from many of their murals, though unfortunately not always juxtaposed where one might wish to find them next to the manuscript material (for example, Fig. 6, p. 145, a peasant plowing depicted in Cave 85, and the preparatory sketch, on Cat. № 38, p. 267; or Guanyin saving those in danger from perils, Cat. № 16, pp. 218-221, and the small portion of the wall-size depiction in Cave 45 on p. 63, where it would have been wonderful to have more of that wall).

What the visitor to this material (now that the exhibition has closed) cannot adequately apprehend is the way in which three full-scale replicas of caves (two produced specifically for the exhibition) offered the next best thing to visiting Mogao. Yes, viewing replicas hardly can re-create the experience of actually visiting the caves themselves, but as the exhibition materials make clear, in many ways this can make it possible to see and understand more than one might do in what are inevitably the all too brief visits allowed in any one cave. One of the essays in the catalog, by Lou Jie, provides fascinating insights into how the accomplished painters of the Academy in copying the originals learned from the process about the techniques in the production of

the murals. A section of the catalog explains how the replica caves were made, and a short video (one of many on the Getty website which relate directly to the exhibition) shows that process happening. For the users of the catalog though, more could have been done to provide a sense of what those replicas revealed. The fascinating Cave 285 probably is best served in this regard, but the very early Cave 275 is somewhat ill served. Even if one goes to the internet to view the caves through video or stitched images that allow one to move the viewpoint and zoom in on detail, at least so far that technology is no substitute for obtaining the sense of space and context one obtains by actually being there. I cannot judge the effectiveness of the "multimedia immersive experience" employing "experimental 3D technologies" (p. 145) mounted in the exhibition that introduced visitors to the stunning Tang Cave 45.

Among the essays in the book is one co-authored by the recently retired Director of the Dunhuang Academy, Fan Jinshi, introducing clearly the process of construction, the cave architecture, and how it changed over time. Director Fan also co-authored an essay reflecting on the recent history of the site and the serious challenges it faces in the future, the latter subject also the focus of an essay by Neville Agnew and Wang Xudong. Addressing those challenges is one of the main themes of the exhibition, which explained in some detail the decade-long restoration and conservation project of the Getty and the Academy in the late Tang Cave 85 that has served as a test bed and model for what needs to be done for almost all the other caves to ward off decay and destruction (see the essay by Lori Wong and Su Bomin). One of the most serious problems now is the exponential growth of tourism to Mogao, which is overwhelming any reasonable program to allow controlled access to the caves themselves, each visit marked by a sharp spike in temperature and humidity that damages the paintings. The Mogao Caves were among the first sites in China to receive World Heritage designation by UNESCO, but that can be a mixed blessing in its promotion of tourism. The surge in Chinese economic growth and consequent social changes has led to an explosion of domestic tourism. Even without this human impact, there are threats of the painted layers peeling off the walls on their own, the potential for serious destruction by an earthquake and more. Increasingly then, those who come to Mogao will have to experience the caves virtually in the new visitor center at Dunhuang. Access to the caves themselves has for some time been limited, in part by a sliding scale of entry fees which makes many of the more interesting (and fragile) ones too expensive for ordinary mortals. Developments outside the control of the Academy based on commercial calculation constitute another threat to the integrity of the site, one such being a plan to create a kind of Disneylandish tourist complex not far from the caves.

Among the important collaborators in the exhibition were the British Library and British Museum, which provided the majority of the manuscripts and banner paintings from the trove removed from Dunhuang in 1907 by Aurel Stein. Another of the most significant collections, in France, taken there by Paul Pelliot's expedition the year after Stein visited Mogao, also loaned material. While Neville Agnew, who has headed the Getty's conservation program at

Dunhuang since its inception, characterized this removal of Dunhuang treasures as “deplorable,” he also makes clear in his introductory essay (co-authored with Marcia Reed) that the availability of the Dunhuang material in Western repositories helped to produce a whole new field of scholarship and appreciation for the history and culture of the silk Roads. The International Dunhuang Project (IDP) at the British library (idp.bl.uk) has been bringing together in digital form the scattered treasures from the Library Cave and other materials from the various expeditions along the eastern silk roads so that they can be freely accessible anywhere. Thus it was appropriate that one of the contributors to the catalog and the events coordinated with the exhibition was IDP’s director, Susan Whitfield, who has written prolifically on the site’s history. Her essay here is of interest for its emphasis on the key role of Dunhuang as a major center for long-distance exchange, without which the Mogao caves as we know them probably could not have come into being. Some of the objects in the exhibit were selected specifically to highlight how Dunhuang was an international crossroads—manuscripts with texts in Turkic runes (Cat. № 2), others with interlined Tibetan and Chinese (№ 6) or interlined Sogdian and Sanskrit (№ 5), prayers in Hebrew (No. 3), a Chinese translation of Christian texts (№ 4). At least in part Whitfield is responding here to Valerie Hansen’s skeptical take (in her *The Silk Road: A New History*) on whether the “Silk Road” ever involved significant long-distance trade. Of course one has to recognize that the two scholars may be focusing on different parts of the same beast, where in fact, some reasonable middle ground can accommodate both long-distance and shorter, localized networks and interactions as well as differences in the scale of what it all may have meant in economic terms.

I am not sure how I would have responded to the exhibition at the Getty after the experience of my first encounter at Mogao itself. I can recall the cramped conditions within many of the caves, where one had to be careful not to brush against the walls, where a thin film of the ever present desert dust often obscured colors, where the dim lighting behind a pillar or the distance separating the viewer from a high ceiling might obscure details even if one came equipped with a good flashlight and binoculars. The complexity of the imagery in itself was overwhelming for the novice; by the time one had figured out two or three of the scenes, the allotted half hour was up. After two or three dozen of the caves over a period of a couple of weeks, the details began to blur. On my second visit in 2008, through no fault of our own, we experienced first-hand how the caves are under threat of self-destruction, when some pieces of ceiling murals detached and showered us with debris. At the same time though, we had a chance to see the conservation work underway in Cave 85, with its hope for the future.

My description of the cave visits may make them sound like a miserable experience. On the contrary, it was profoundly inspiring, a huge privilege to be there, and provided the impetus to keep returning to the material, if not the site, in order to learn more. One is exposed to both the intimacy of small spaces and the grandeur of the larger caves, even if so many of them no longer contain the original sculpture. The artistry inspired by religious devotion is extraordinary. Apart from visits to the caves themselves, we had

unrestricted access to the replicas in the then visitor center; that did in fact offer the opportunity to explore and learn in depth. One can only hope that the virtual Mogao experience will make learning about this unique site that is so central to Silk Road studies easier and even more satisfying.

Beyond this book, which offers a great deal to introduce the caves and also to inform those who may already know something about them, there is much to be found on the Getty’s website (http://www.getty.edu/research/exhibitions_events/exhibitions/cave_temples_dunhuang/index.html): lectures which were sponsored in conjunction with the exhibition (one by Victor Mair, another by Valerie Hansen), video footage of all the presentations at the accompanying symposium that honored Fan Jinshi, and several different videos on conservation issues. There is a link to the Dunhuang Academy’s website, which promises more of the virtual experience beyond what, at least on first glance so far, is quite limited. One can follow a link to the IDP website for high resolution images of the manuscripts and banners which were in the exhibition, providing one can obtain a list of the inventory numbers to search them out. The IDP also is posting collections of the historic photos, a selection of which is reproduced in this book. For those who would want a slim, inexpensive and still excellent introduction to the caves, I would recommend Roderick Whitfield, Susan Whitfield and Neville Agnew, *Mogao at Dunhuang: Art and History on the Silk Road*, the second edition (2105) of the book first published by the Getty in 2000.

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NOTES

1. Back in 2002, as part of a series of Silk Road events co-sponsored by the Silkroad Foundation and the Simpson Humanities Center at the University of Washington (Seattle), we explored seriously the possibility of mounting one of the Mogao Cave replicas in the university’s art museum. However, problems of space, time and other logistical challenges prevented that from happening. We did display in the gallery of the university’s school of art a selection of the superb photos by the lead photographer at the caves, Wu Jian, an exhibition which shared space with the equally fine photos of the Mongolian Altai taken by Gary Tepper. I wrote a gallery guide for the photo exhibit, providing details of the several caves depicted in Wu Jian’s photos.

In 2016, the Seattle Asian Art Museum mounted a small but beautifully conceived Dunhuang exhibit, featuring the photographs, mural reproductions and some artifacts from the collection of James and Lucy Lo, now housed at Princeton University (see the brief overview of the exhibit, <http://www.seattleartmuseum.org/exhibitions/dunhuang>). The Lo collection of photos taken during an extended stay at the caves in 1943–44 is one of the most important sets of images documenting them on the eve of the preservation and conservation work now supervised by the Dunhuang Academy.

2. In his introduction to the symposium in Los Angeles at the Getty honoring the recently retired Director of the Dunhuang Academy, Fan Jinshi, Neville Agnew took special note of the role played by Director Fan and Mimi Gates in helping to organize the Getty exhibition. Gates is the Director emerita of the Seattle Art Museum and chairs the Dunhuang Foundation (<http://dunhuangfoundation.us/>), which is raising funds to support the work of the Academy and conservation at the caves.



The Mogao Oasis from the east



Lokopala (guardian figure), ca. 8th century, from Mogao grottoes (Cat. No. 36). Photo taken in Musée Guimet, Paris, Inv. № MG 17761.

All photos by Daniel C. Waugh



Silk banner depicting Vajrapani, ca. 851–900 (Cat. № 42). Photo taken in British Museum, Inv. № 1919,0101,0.132 (Ch.xxiv.002).



Lokopala (guardian figure), ca. 8th century, from Mogao grottoes (Cat. No. 37). Photo taken in Musée Guimet, Paris, Inv. № MG 17762.

Tribute horse and camels, probable piece from scroll of Cat. № 7, ca 10th century. Photo taken in National Museum, New Delhi.





Silk banner with scenes from the life of the Buddha, ca. 8th-9th century (Cat. № 13). Photo taken in British Museum, Inv. № 1919,0101,0.97 (Ch. lv.0012).



Embroidered silk banner on hemp backing depicting Miraculous Image of Liangzhou (Fanhé Buddha), ca. 8th century Cat. № 10). Detail. Photo taken in British Museum, Inv. № MAS,0.1129 (Ch.00260).

Buddha Names Sutra, ca. 9th-10th century (Cat. № 28). Photo taken in British Museum, BL shelf mark Or.8210/S.253).

