

Reflections on a Field Investigation of Classic Silk Road Cave Art

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Abstract

This paper examines how embodied on-site experience shapes the understanding of classic cave art along the Silk Road. Based on the author's participation in the Professional Field Investigation course at the Academy of Arts & Design, Tsinghua University, and the 2024 field trip to Gansu, Qinghai, and Shaanxi, it offers a reflective and practice-based account of four dimensions of field experience: environment, state of mind, empathy, and understanding. The paper argues that geographical conditions, lighting, materiality, spatial scale, and bodily responses generate forms of knowledge that photographic and textual representations cannot fully convey. It further contends that cross-temporal empathy and sensitivity to place are essential to both art historical interpretation and contemporary art creation. By presenting field investigation as an embodied pedagogical method, the study contributes to art education and suggests that outstanding artworks are inseparable from their cultural and geographical contexts.

Keywords

Silk Road; cave art; field investigation; embodied experience; cross-temporal empathy; art education.

1. Introduction

The Silk Road, often described as the great artery of Eurasian civilization, has long attracted attention. As Li Mingwei states, this ancient route “stretches across the Eurasian continent for more than seven thousand kilometers and brings together several major cultural systems of humanity (Roman-Western European culture, Chinese culture, Indian culture, and Semitic-Islamic culture). It has been hailed as the ‘great artery of East-West cultural exchange’ and the ‘canal of human civilization’[2]. It played an extremely important role in promoting exchanges among human civilizations and in the economic and cultural interactions of different historical periods.

Those engaged in the arts are even more eager to investigate the Silk Road, for “the Silk Road possesses an enormous body of artistic heritage, and many widely known art phenomena occurred along this great route”[3]. For this reason, since 1995 the Department of Sculpture at the Academy of Arts & Design, Tsinghua University, has offered the Professional Field Investigation course. Every summer, faculty and students spend twenty days traveling together through Gansu, Qinghai, and Shaanxi to investigate caves, temples, deserts, and museums along the Silk Road. The sites include Maijishan in Tianshui, Gansu; the Mogao Caves (Thousand Buddha Caves), Yulin Caves, and Western Thousand Buddha Caves in Dunhuang; Bingling Temple in Yongjing; Zhangye Great Buddha Temple; Labrang Monastery in Xiahe, Gannan; Kumbum Monastery in Qinghai; as well as the Shaanxi Provincial Museum, the Museum of the Terracotta Army and Mausoleum of Qin Shi Huang, and the Lanzhou Museum. The investigation is led by Professor Dong Shubing, who participates throughout the entire trip. In addition to giving detailed explanations of cave art, he requires students to make on-site copies and sketches, combining theory with practice in order to achieve a deeper understanding and appreciation of the charm of cave sculptures.

In August 2024, as a second-year undergraduate in the Department of Sculpture, I was fortunate to participate in this course. It profoundly impressed me—not only because of the breadth of knowledge involved in the investigation and research, but also because of some extraordinary embodied experiences on site. At that time, the Professional Field Investigation course was celebrating its thirtieth anniversary, which made this journey of knowledge learning and experience all the more meaningful.

Near the end of the investigation, from August 31 to September 1, more than fifty faculty members and students from the Academy of Arts & Design, together with a number of experts and scholars, gathered at Maijishan in Tianshui, Gansu, for a seminar commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the Professional Field Investigation course. At the seminar, experts and scholars highly praised the course's influence and exemplary role in teaching at Chinese art institutions. I also shared my reflections during the student speech session at the end. Interestingly, although two years have passed since the investigation, the insights I gained then have continued to ferment and have greatly influenced my later study and creative work. Some friends, inspired by my experience, also became interested in the Silk Road investigation and undertook it themselves. The following discussion follows the structure of my speech at the seminar, while elaborating more deeply on certain issues worth exploring, so that readers may share my reflections.

2. Environment: Holistic Perception Shaped by Geographical Factors

I believe that the major temples and cave sites in Northwest China must be experienced firsthand, because the content we see online or in books leads us to focus only on the images themselves, and the amount of information it conveys is limited compared with the real space, light, and materials perceived by the human eye. As early as 1997, Hu Tongqing observed that “Chinese Buddhist cave sculpture is a complete environmental art and a three-dimensional art” [1]. Therefore, attention to the environment in which the caves are located is the foundation of field investigation. Professor Dong and the docents at the various sites repeatedly told the students that the mode of sculptural production in different regions is determined by the geology of the region where the sculptures are located. In some regions—Dunhuang, for example—because the stone is coarse-grained and difficult to shape, many sculptures there are clay sculptures over stone or wooden armatures, and the stone itself is rarely used for detailed carving. This is precisely the difference in artistic expression caused by “geographical particularity.” Only through close, face-to-face observation and study can one truly perceive the differences among materials. In addition, the sense of spatial distance must also be experienced on site. “Even inside a cave, because the structure of the cave differs and the sculptures are positioned differently, the impression the sculptures give viewers naturally differs as well; that is, the distance between the divine and the human also changes accordingly” [1].

At the same time, I believe that the “geographical particularity” outside the caves enables one to establish a close connection between the region itself and its unique art. For example, as soon as our group arrived in Dunhuang, we suffered from persistent diarrhea; or when going out, I felt that although the sun shone directly on the land of Dunhuang and it was extremely hot, I did not sweat much and felt very dry. There were many other on-site experiences of this kind. It was precisely these subtle physiological changes that indirectly shaped my feelings when viewing artworks from the Northwest. More directly related to viewing was the grayness of the entire world that met my eyes.

Shortly after arriving, on the road from the airport to the hotel, I saw outside the window a yellow-gray sky, yellow-gray walls, yellow-gray leaves, and gray tree trunks. I felt as if I were breathing in dust and walking through a castle of sand. The driver explained that the Dunhuang sky was usually quite blue, but I still felt that this yellow-gray color was highly representative.

The whole of Dunhuang seemed like a cultural relic just unearthed from the soil. This feeling later became strangely connected with those sculptures during my cave investigations. I felt that the picture of life in the Northwest and the artistic appearance of the Northwest caves were, from a certain angle, surprisingly consistent. This local life experience, together with the face-to-face perception of the scale of actual sculptures, immersed me in an indescribable atmosphere. This is precisely the kind of information that photographs can never capture.

3. State of Mind: The Extraordinary Experience of Being Present

While viewing a huge Nirvana statue in the Mogao Caves, the experienced docent asked the students to turn off their flashlights and headlamps, and then closed the only source of light in the cave—the door connecting the inside and outside—leaving the cave in total darkness. The Nirvana statue before us disappeared, and if we had not remained standing still, we would probably have lost all sense of direction. Then a faint glimmer gradually appeared before my eyes. I realized that the docent had gently reopened the door, but only a crack. By the weak light, I saw the blurred face of the Nirvana Buddha; there was nothing else. The entire cave seemed to contain only me and that Buddha—who was at that moment looking at me compassionately with half-open, half-closed eyes. The door was slowly pushed open, and sunlight reflected onto the statue, making it seem as if Buddha-light were radiating directly from the statue itself. Before this huge symbol of auspiciousness, hope, or happiness, I felt an unprecedented calm deep within my heart, even physiologically—the anxiety of having to complete a task and the physical exhaustion caused by the dry, hot weather vanished at that moment. All of this can be experienced only on site. “Because the Buddhist cave sculptures we see today have endured thousands of years of wind, sun, and rain, they possess more historical vicissitudes than other sculptures. Many mottled and weathered works appear both real and unreal, both close and distant, some rough and unrestrained, others simple and elegant” [1]. This feeling of being both real and unreal, both close and distant, is especially vivid on site.

Similarly, when Professor Dong’s friend gave us a professional explanation at the Western Thousand Buddha Caves—in order to let us experience how ancient people saw the sculptures when kneeling in worship—he also asked us to turn off our flashlights and headlamps, leaving only a flashlight in his hand adjusted to its weakest setting, shining upward on several sculptures. The feeling changed instantly again. To simulate candlelight, he gently covered the light source with his hand and moved it irregularly and slightly. Several sculptures, together with the murals behind them, began to flicker faintly before us. It was precisely the blur caused by this weak light that created distance from reality; it made the sculptures appear full of life, their indistinguishable colors and forms resembling flesh and blood. People in earlier times lived in this kind of environment. I think that even if visitors today are not believers, when they see this scene, at least for those few seconds, their hearts will also be devout.

At this moment, I recalled the method advocated by Wu Hung of re-entering history from the perspective of contemporary space. He argues that we should “understand the existence and historical significance of caves from the actual experience of visitors.” This can help us reopen cave art materials and reveal new layers of meaning[4]. At the cave site, I deeply understood the meaning of this statement.

4. Empathy: The Fusion of Horizons in Dialogue between Past and Present

The greatest inspiration I drew from this trip is that an outstanding work of art must be closely connected with the culture of the region where its creator lived and with the creator’s own experiences and feelings—these factors may even be decisive, just as the strong cultural background and necessary geographical conditions were for the birth of these traditional sculptures.

The teachers once raised a question: why were so many caves carved in the seemingly desolate deserts of the Northwest? As soon as this question was raised, the first image that came to my mind was the scene from our first day, when we took a bus from downtown Dunhuang into the desert. It was on the way to the Western Thousand Buddha Caves. Before the bus had gone far, I looked back and saw only a long highway stretching behind us. Along the way, several narrow roads branched off and extended endlessly to the side, leading deeper into the desert. The urban buildings on which we ordinarily depend had completely disappeared, replaced by natural scenery beyond the city. I suddenly became afraid—everything I needed in daily life could find no response here. There were only gray sand dunes and sandy ground shimmering faintly, endlessly repeating to me an eternal monotony and desolation.

Yet the ancients rode camels slowly through this endlessness. Even so, in such a monotonous and desolate natural world, they carved out their own realm of faith. The Western Thousand Buddha Caves serve as an example. This site was an important passage along the Silk Road, the last stop before leaving Yumen Pass, and a major resting place on the route from Dunhuang and Yangguan to the Western Regions. Monks and merchants rested here briefly; consequently, traces of smoke can still be seen on the ceilings and some sculptures in many caves, bearing witness to the life once lived there.

Carving niches and making sculptures here offered weary travelers who had endured countless hardships along the way consolation for their travel fatigue and motivation to continue. Under conditions in which survival could not be guaranteed, these caves symbolized people's faith. Driven by both geographical and humanistic factors, these caves naturally came into being. They were not the result of a group of ancients suddenly deciding to come to a randomly chosen empty plot and build freely to express their emotions; all of this has its historical context and reasons for its inevitable emergence.

This is also why we need to conduct on-site investigations of the artworks here and study the local culture extensively: to understand outstanding artworks comprehensively from the perspectives of cultural background, bodily experience, and spiritual experience, and, by understanding the process and conditions of their birth, to reflect on how we, as students at an art academy, should create better works.

5. Embodied Understanding: Art and Life

This made me more convinced of an idea: all good works are born naturally; they involve no coercion, nor are they groundless. Professor Dong also discussed this issue: when we mature, our experiences and the knowledge we have learned will naturally flow out, including the cultural environment in which we live and our own experiences and knowledge. The premise is that we must not be insensitive to these things, lose interest in them, or even refuse to absorb them.

At the seminar, I also strongly agreed with a remark by Professor Zhang Gan: "Art does not progress; it only changes." This statement implies that both ancient outstanding art and modern and contemporary outstanding art are shaped differently by the historical background in which they emerged. But that is not all. On the third day at Maijishan, when we visited the specially graded caves, I found that Song-dynasty sculptures already differed greatly from one another. Unlike the basic standing or seated Buddha images, in a specially graded cave we saw a huge standing Shakyamuni. Beside him on the right stood a child sculpture about the height of my shoulder, with eyes tightly closed and hands pressed together in reverence. The tall Shakyamuni extended his right hand and suspended it above the child's head, his body leaning slightly toward the child, as if he wanted to stroke the child's head. Through the docent's explanation, we learned that the child beside Shakyamuni was the son born to him and his wife before he became a Buddha. Later, when Shakyamuni attained enlightenment, because of his

identity as a Buddha, he could not warmly welcome his own child. In order to become a Buddha, Shakyamuni had, through arduous practice, abandoned human distractions; now, as a Buddha, such emotions could no longer exist in his heart. The child's expression seemed to suppress sorrow while pressing his hands together in devotion, supporting his father in bringing hope to all beings. Thus, Shakyamuni's extended hand, which wanted to stroke his child, ultimately did not fall, forever suspended in midair. After hearing this story, I sighed deeply and was also very surprised—Buddhist sculptures could actually express something so vivid. I had thought that stories from the world above the mundane were not something I could easily empathize with. Such Buddhist sculptures, by depicting a scene close to people's lives, narrowed the distance between viewers and Buddhism—this is a difference in sculptural form caused by different purposes of artistic creation. Examples of this kind, viewed across different periods, also include differences in facial expressions: serene smiles appeared to offer spiritual consolation to people in turmoil, while dignified expressions appeared to satisfy the dignity of the gods and sociopolitical needs.

6. Conclusion

As art has developed to the present day, people have the right to freely express what is in their hearts, and the purposes of creation are infinite. This is why we continually search for an eternal definition of art yet can never obtain an answer. Art is both human emotion and a means; it can become faith and also a commodity. We should be sufficiently sensitive to what happens on the land beneath our feet and to our own subtle feelings, so that in an era when everything can be art, we do not lose the source of thought and the reason for creation.

Let the thoughts in the heart flow out naturally and become a vast field of energy—or perhaps virtual yellow sand—embracing the world.

References

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