

## **Permanence in Re-creation: Cave 61 and Artistic Appropriation at Mogao Caves of Dunhuang in the Tenth Century**

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Rock-cut cave temples were built to last. This paper recognizes permanence as a salient feature of this unique architectural form in China and aims to examine the subject by redirecting critical scrutiny from the initial cycle of creation and reception to later episodes of recreation and modification in a site's long lifespan. The mid tenth century at Mogao Caves of Dunhuang in the northwestern region presents an ideal case study. It was a time when the cave temple complex, having been in use since the fourth century, underwent another period of intense activities under the generous patronage of Cao Yuanzhong, military governor of Dunhuang and the de facto ruler of the entire Hexi region. Throughout his long tenure (945-974), Cao initiated a series of ambitious projects at Mogao that came to redefine the very character of the site at the time. Particularly relevant is the pictorial program in Cave 61, the largest ever attempted at Mogao.

In designing the many large-scale compositions that decorated the four walls of the central chamber, painters of Cave 61 had borrowed compositional concepts and layouts freely from similar examples in earlier caves. Various strategies in recreating older models in the new cave are found, for instance, throughout the Life of the Buddha cycle, which is comprised of thirty-three panels in the lower registers of the three main walls. Detailed visual comparisons suggest that painters in the tenth century were familiar with and consciously repeated certain compositions from the eighth and ninth centuries. While there does not seem to have been any overall or systematic scheme in shaping such appropriations from Dunhuang's artistic pasts, the case of Cave 61 does raise many questions about the painters' practice in the tenth century as well as the patrons' role in making it possible. Accordingly, this paper considers the Cao family's motives in endorsing certain motifs or styles from earlier times as part of a larger effort to promote or legitimize specific agendas of cultural orthodoxy in the present. At the same time, it also explores the issue of access at Mogao by discussing some of the mechanisms involved in the custodianship and maintenance of older units to which their earlier patrons no longer laid claim in the later period. One broader argument to be made concerns the role of the cave temple site in shaping the artistic memory of Dunhuang community in the tenth century. Not unlike the museum in modern times, Mogao seems to have served as the preferred repository of previous styles and a training ground for artisans. In a grandiose structure like Cave 61, cave temples of bygone eras were re-enlivened through different modes of artistic appropriation, as they were once again made relevant in the present by becoming part of a new space and a living public.