

Study on the Subjects and Styles of Mural Paintings in the Kizil Grottoes of Xinjiang

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Abstract: The Kizil Caves, situated in Baili County within the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China, rank among the most significant Buddhist sites along the historic Silk Road. The murals adorning these caves are not merely works of Buddhist art; they serve as invaluable resources for understanding the historical and cultural legacies of the Western Regions. This article delves into an in-depth examination of the themes and stylistic elements found in Kizil Cave murals, shedding light on their significance within Buddhist artistry and highlighting their rich characteristics reflecting multicultural fusion. These murals depict a wide range of themes, including narratives from Buddha's life, Jataka tales, stories exploring causal relationships, everyday secular activities, and decorative arts. Their artistic styles exhibit influences from Indian traditions, Central Asian motifs, and aspects derived from Han culture found in the Central Plains. Research findings underscore that the Kizil Cave murals hold remarkable artistic and historical significance; they encapsulate religious beliefs and social customs prevalent during that period while offering valuable insights into cultural interactions facilitated by the ancient Silk Road.

Keywords: Kizil Grottoes; Mural Paintings; Buddhist Art; Themes; Style; Xinjiang.

1. Introduction

Excavated between the 3rd century AD and 9th century AD, the Kizil Grottoes constitute one of Xinjiang's premier examples of Buddhist heritage. Serving as a crucial juncture on this extensive trade route, these caves not only document Buddhism's spread within Western regions but also reflect deep cross-cultural exchanges involving Central Asia, China's Middle Kingdoms, and beyond. The intricate mural paintings—the core form of expression at Kizil—showcase diverse themes alongside distinctive stylistic features that contribute to ongoing studies regarding cultural interchange as well as artistic evolution throughout antiquity along the Silk Road. By carefully investigating both thematic content and stylistic approaches present in these remarkable murals, this paper aims to elucidate their unique status within Buddhist visual culture while highlighting instances of profound cultural integration.

2. Historical Background and Geographical Environment of the Kizil Caves

The Kizil Grottoes, situated in Bakken County within the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of China, rest at the southern base of the Tianshan Mountains and along the northern perimeter of the Tarim Basin. This site represents a significant point on the ancient Silk Road. Carved between the 3rd and 9th centuries A.D., over a span exceeding six centuries, these grottoes bear witness to the rise and flourishing of Buddhism in this region. Due to their geographic positioning, the Kizil Grottoes served as a crucial link connecting Central Asia with China's Central Plains. Here, diverse cultures converged and merged, giving rise to a distinctive artistic style influenced by this interaction. The arid climate paired with abundant sandstone resources in the Tarim Basin created ideal conditions for constructing these caves. Skillfully integrated into mountain formations, each grotto has become an extensive repository of Buddhist artistry

[1]. The complex consists of multiple zones that exhibit varied distributions of caves and mural themes, reflecting different historical contexts and artistic trends across time. Particularly during periods marked by trade exchanges and religious diffusion along the Silk Road, these grottoes emerged as pivotal spiritual and cultural hubs. They attracted numerous monks, traders, and worshippers drawn to pilgrimage pursuits. The murals adorning these caverns encapsulate not only Buddhist teachings but also highlight a society characterized by its multicultural influences during that era. Imagery therein showcases figures dressed in styles derived from Indian traditions alongside Central Asian motifs imbued with Han cultural elements from adjacent Central Plains regions—testifying to the unique allure of ancient Western Regional cultures. Artistry from this period not only achieved exceptional technical proficiency but also displayed considerable creativity in thematic choices and expressive methods employed within these works.

3. Analysis of the Themes of the Murals in the Kizil Caves

3.1. Buddhist Themes

The Buddhist themes in Kizil Cave murals are varied and numerous, which, according to several scholars, forms the core subject matter of the whole mural system and embodies the artistic value. Among them, the most common theme is stories of the Buddha's lifetime, depicting the series of important events that happened from the birth to the enlightenment of Sakyamuni. They are normally painted in the form of comic strips, with each painting minutely depicting every significant moment in Buddha's life. For example, in the painting headed "Birth," Sakyamuni descends from the right side of Maya's body, accompanied by bodhisattvas and deities, symbolizing the sanctity and solemnity of the Buddha himself. In "First Turning of the Dharma Wheel," the Buddha sits under the bodhi tree, surrounded by believers. Such paintings depict the solemnity of the first introduction of the teachings of Buddhism. And

these images, apart from preaching Buddhist sermons, give one a feeling of the power and charm of the Dharma by the vividness of picturing. While Jataka tales tell many of the previous lives and deeds of Sakyamuni in his earlier incarnations, such as "King Shibi Sacrificing His Flesh to Save a Dove" and "Prince Sattva Sacrificing Himself to Feed Tigers." Such stories reinforce the spirit of compassion and self-sacrifice, imparting lessons on core values of Buddhism. In "King Shibi Sacrificing His Flesh to Save a Dove," the skillful painter depicts the instant in which King Shibi cuts flesh from his own body to save a dove's life, showing great compassion. "Prince Sattva Sacrificing Himself to Feed Tigers," Sattva jumps off the cliff to feed the hungry tigers with a spirit of courage, showing the grandeur, awe, and reverence for Buddhism's selfless spirit. Cause and effect stories are another important Buddhist theme, explaining the concept of causality through specific narrative scenes. For instance, "Five Hundred Robbers Embrace Buddhism" depicts the transformation of five hundred robbers who, under the guidance of the Buddha, put down their weapons, repent, and eventually become monks. This not only showcases the Buddha's compassion and wisdom but also reflects the Buddhist concept of causality and retribution [2]. These stories are often presented in a simple yet vivid manner, enabling viewers to quickly grasp their profound meanings. Scripture transformation stories are large-scale murals based on Buddhist classics, such as the "Lotus Sutra Transformation" and "Nirvana Sutra Transformation," which depict the teachings and cultivation realms of the Buddha. In the "Lotus Sutra Transformation," painters use rich imagination and exquisite techniques to vividly present numerous scenes from the classic before the viewers. The "Nirvana Sutra Transformation" portrays the solemn scene of the Buddha's nirvana, with the Buddha lying peacefully, surrounded by mourning disciples and deities, creating an ambiance of solemnity and tranquility. Causal narratives are another significant Buddhist theme that explicate causality through concrete narrative scenes. In one example, Five Hundred Robbers Embrace Buddhism, the story describes the change of five hundred robbers who, with the Buddha as their instructor, set down their weapons and become monks. The themes manifest here speak of the Buddha's power and wisdom, as well as the Buddhist idea of karmic causation and retributive justice. The narration is vivid and simple, thus teaching the people in a way that allows them to easily grasp its deep meaning. Story transformation murals are massive based on Buddhist classics: Lotus Sutra Transformation and Nirvana Sutra Transformation. Each show there the teachings or a particular abode of the Buddha. In Lotus Sutra Transformation, the painter gives vivid descriptions of numerous scenes from the classic before the eyes of beholders via rich imagination and extraordinary efficiency. The Nirvana Sutra Transformation shows the sober setting created for the event of the Buddha's nirvana: peaceful, with the Buddha relaxed and prostrate in death, circled by grieving disciples and deities. Beneath this shadow, it seems, they create a sense of great solemnity and deep peace.

3.2. Secular Themes

Secular subjects in the frescoes of the Kizil Grottoes, depicting disease impressions amidst common life scenes and folk practices of the ancient people in the Western Regions, constitute irreplaceable documentation of history for posterity. These are sundry themes: feasting, music and dance, farming

and hunting, and market transactions are but a few, embodying the living complex of the times. The frescoes of a feast give bright pictures of the people sitting around a table enjoying good food and company. They render tables, plates, and wine vessels in such exquisite detail that one can smell tempting spices in the air. The men, women, and children in these works display various moods of joy, crying, or meditative, thus reflecting the atmosphere and spirit of genuine Western Region banquet scenes. These offer a clear glance into the social customs of the time while portraying the harmony and flourishing of society. Palestinian music and dance frescoes are even further away from unity, showing numerous instruments and their performers. Here dancers are sweetly elegant and lifted, while musicians are enraptured in the performance of so many kinds of lutes, konghous, and flutes. These are pure recreations of the art of music and dance and affirm the multicultural and open character of ancient Western Region civilization. The attire, hairstyles, and makeup thus display cultural traits of different ethnic groups, vividly evoking the beauty of cultural integration. Frescoes of farming and hunting depict the productive life of the people of the Ancient Western Regions. The farming-themed frescoes show the entire process of plowing, sowing, and harvesting, with the farmers clearly tired and sweating. Both the hunting and farming scenes recorded the development of agriculture of that time, for they depicted a pattern of coexistence and harmony between man and nature. The hunting scenes are more exhilarating, portraying the hunters hunting the beasts, shooting arrows, taming horses, thus demonstrating courage under wisdom of the Ancient Western Regions People. The precision of these frescoes-the movement of animals and how the setting is depicted-is all expertly done, drawing one back into the era of hunters fighting nature. Market scenes recreate the dynamism of commercial life along the Silk Road. Bustling scenes lead one to the everyday exchange and wheeling-dealing with the exchange of goods and currency. Such commercial exchanges provide a vivid picture of economic development in early life along the ancient Silk Road and thus become very good witnesses to the exchange and integration of different ethnic groups and cultures [3].

3.3. Decorative Subjects

The mural decorations in the Kizil Caves occupy a significant place in the whole artistic system, further illuminating the caves and acting as the expression and pursuit of beauty by the artists of ancient times. Most of these decorative murals appear in the ceilings, walls, and lintels, acting as a perfect background and setting of Buddhist as well as secular themes through different geometric shapes. Of all ceiling decorations, the lotus flower is the most frequently encountered theme. In Buddhism, the great lotus flower symbolizes ultimate cleanliness and nobility. The lotus type became much more varied in shape as well as richly colored in the Kizil Caves. Some lotus designs are intricately elaborate, having slim patterns that appear to lilt and sway in the wind; at other times, they may be something very large and majestic, gobbling up the roof with a feeling of solemnity and veneration. The exquisite nature through which various lotus patterns have been applied to beautify the ceiling also projects a great amount of sacredness against the background of Buddhist murals and brings viewers into the religious atmosphere more easily. The decorative murals of the walls are mainly characterized by geometric and scroll foliage

patterns. Geometric patterns most often appear in the borders and dividing lines—simple yet rhythmic, augmenting the murals' aesthetic effect and effectively separating different sections of the content, giving the composition a more hierarchical and clear approach. They display a natural beauty, by their flowing curves and shapes, another manifestation of the artists' creativity and what the other artist does to nature's presence. These patterns were often interwoven with scenes of nature from Buddhist stories, lending energy and harmony to the entire composition. The ornately proportioned murals on the lintels and niches depict apsaras and donors. In Buddhism, these celestial beings are an essential component of temple murals. The Kizil Caves are characterized by beautifully posed apsaras, clad in flowing garments; some are seen holding musical instruments, others scattering flowers in blessing. These create a living and enthralling beauty within the murals that suggests transcendence, enriching the caves with a kind of mystic solemnity. Their donors, in turn, the sponsors and devotees of the caves, are often shown with terrific expressions of piety, attired in splendid garments, indicating the religious climate of such days as well as the fervor of the people's faith. One more thing that is distinct with regards to the decorative murals is the use of colors.

4. Stylistic Characteristics of Kizil Cave Mural Paintings

4.1. Painting Techniques

The distinctive and refined painting methods utilized in the murals of the Kizil Grottoes showcase not merely the exceptional talent of ancient artists, but also highlight the advancements in painting techniques during that era. A multitude of strategies is evident in these murals, including line drawing, plein air painting, halo effects, and outlining—each exhibiting its own remarkable beauty. Line drawing serves as the foundational technique prevalent throughout the Kizil Caves. Artists employ smooth, vigorous lines to delineate both characters and landscapes; these lines can vary from thick to thin and are often continuous or broken. They effectively convey the shape and movement of subjects. For instance, within “Tales of the Buddha,” an illustration captures Mrs. Moya’s graceful pose alongside a sacred portrayal of Buddha himself, resulting in a composition brimming with vitality and artistic resonance. Furthermore, flat painting technique features prominently among these murals. Brilliant colors are strategically applied across expansive sections to produce a powerful visual effect. The predominant use of striking hues such as red, green, blue, and yellow contributes not only to an eye-catching palette but also fosters a lively atmosphere characteristic of this art form [4]. An exemplary scene making use of plein air technique occurs in “Banquet Scene,” where this method vividly portrays both the surroundings and attire worn by characters engaged in joyful festivities. Lastly, halos provide depth through layering within compositions; they enhance three-dimensionality while emphasizing figures’ importance amidst surrounding elements. Specialists try to depict the reality of things in their artwork through gradual transition of colors. When treating the skin, clothes and the below-ground details of characters in “Music and Dance Scenes”, other artists apply the halo technique throughout the figures to add softness and naturalness to the dancers' movements and the rich & delicate textures of their instruments. These enhancements not only on visual experience fill the whole scene with the real historical

charm of moving art. The outlining technique has a convincing application in detailing. Using fine lines, the artists outline the hair of characters, the texture of clothing, fur coats of animals, and all the minor details to make the picture finer and perfect. For example, for an ancient work like “Farming Scene” there is dramatic imagery of farming tools in the hands of the farmer, plants in the fields, and, importantly, each droplet of sweat as a testimony to the quest for details in ancient artists. This technique shows not just the artistic skill, but makes the whole picture alive and gives a strong feel of the character of time. The artist's painting techniques of those period murals of the Kizil Grottoes are not only technical illustrations, but also emotional expressions. Each mural therefore gives a portrait of wisdom and effort of ancient artists; through the expert combination of lines and colors, Buddhist legends, secular sorrows, and natural beauty come back to life. These combination techniques not only color up the murals' enjoys aesthetically but also provide their unique and titled artistic actor where regards probably are far changes and ancestral heritage.

4.2. Composition and Spatial Treatment

Different artists worked in various styles to create murals, all resembling scrolls visually pleasing to the eye but enormously appealing to the soul. The composition of the murals at Kizil Grottoes employs both symmetrical and asymmetrical schemes, each totally charming in its own style. Symmetrical compositions depict Buddha and Buddhist stories, giving a solemn and perfect compositional balance to every scene. For instance, in the “Buddha's Sermon,” the image of Buddha is centrally positioned and surrounded by Bodhisattvas and disciples. Such a setting emphasizes the substantial centrality offered to the Buddha and creates a state of respect-enhancing reverence. On the other hand, asymmetrical compositions seem to be mainly employed for secular motifs and decorative murals. In comic scenes like “Musical performance,” the dancers and musicians are arranged to stagger some way that makes the whole composition vibrant and alive with a day-to-day sense. On a spatial treatment level, the Kizil Grottoes murals innovative in their combination of flat space with the effect of shallow relief keep the two-dimensional appeal in the artwork as they introduce a very subjective impression of three-dimensionality. Foreground and background are often modeled with different colors and varied treatment of line work. For instance, in “The Farming Scene,” the foreground figures and instruments are traced in dark lines and very vivid colors, while the distant fields and mountains recede into fainter lines and washes of color, giving the illusion of great depth and an incredibly convincing three-dimensionality. The ingenious handling of space adds depth to the mural and allows the viewer to submerge themselves even more in the painted scene and atmosphere. But other decorative motifs are also very important in realizing the larger mural compositions as established by their spatial arrangement. Patterns like the lotus, geometric pattern, and vine scroll both embellish the main scenes and fill up any vacuums, thus enhancing the sense of harmony in the mural. Examples will include those lotus designs, single blossoms or clusters, that blossom across the ceilings of the caves, wrought fine lines and color passes with creating calm and sacred atmosphere. These decoration art complements the main panels to coalesce into a harmonic visual spectacle. The spatial treatment in the Kizil Grottoes murals is exemplified further with the use of perspective.

Although ancient artists did not have the linear perspective techniques we use today, they achieved depth through a little variation in the size of objects, color variances, and directions of lines [5].

4.3. Characterization

The representation of figures in the murals of the Kizil caves is undoubtedly one of the most striking accomplishments of the ancient artists. The figures in these murals, be they Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, disciples, or mortals in secular life, come alive most charmingly and manifest a clear grasp the ancient artists have over characterization coupled with supreme skills. The image of the Buddha in the murals of the Kizil Grottoes is particularly solemn and compassionate. With smooth lines and soft colors, the painter sketched the Buddha's face, eyes reveal a transcendent serenity and wisdom. The Buddha's body is well-proportioned and naturally postured; the folds of his robe are managed with great care, each light as if fluttering gently in the wind, attributing a sense of sanctity in which the Buddha is seated down from heaven. That is to say, the Buddha in "Saying" is in a lotus seat, surrounded by pious disciples and Bodhisattvas; the whole scene exudes tranquility and harmony, inciting respect among onlookers. The bodhisattvas themselves are more delicate and varied, each one with a nice face and in graceful postures. The painters use different costumes and decorations to distinguish each bodhisattva. An example is "the Statue of Guanyin" in which Guanyin is beautifully dressed in a necklace and gently offers a lotus flower with a divine smile to appease the living. The images depicting the Bodhisattva reveal not only the ancient artists' quest for beauty but also evoke feelings of compassion and warmth. These representations inspire a sense of peace in viewers. In contrast, the portrayals of disciples are characterized by greater vibrancy and liveliness, showcasing various emotions and personalities. Through their facial expressions and physical postures, the artists convey profound sentiments of devotion, joy, and contemplation among the disciples. Take for example "Entering Nirvana." Here, the disciples surround Buddha with distinct expressions—some weep openly; others appear deep in thought or experience torment. Such intricate details imbue the artwork with genuine human emotion that resonates deeply; it feels as though one could hear their silent cries reflecting in their hearts when gazing at this piece. Furthermore, images portraying ordinary life exhibit a rich array of narratives that highlight the diverse landscape of ancient society. The artisans breathe life into these scenes through meticulous attention to detail in characters' clothing, hairstyles, and gestures. In "Farming Scene," for instance, farmers diligently tend to their crops or wield agricultural tools with faces radiating joy and satisfaction. These depictions not only serve as historical documentation of social life during that period but also express admiration for everyday people's lives, inviting viewers to appreciate both the authenticity and richness of ancient existence.

4.4. Stylistic Evolution and External Influence

The gradual evolution of the style across the mural paintings in the Kizil Caves did not only reflect the continuous maturation of the art of the ancient Western region, but were also deeply affected by foreign-art influences, providing, however, uplifting combinations and innovations. Started off with the early Indian Gandharan artistic style, and

fairly gradually developed into the local characteristics of the western region, each event in evolution by the artists has a cohesion of blood and wisdom. Early Kizil cave murals were deeply influenced by Indian Gandhara arts. The figures are of Buddha and Bodhisattvas, characterized by long noses and deep-set eyes, fully-developed features, and simple yet subdued lines and colors, revealing a great solemnity and sanctity about them. For example, in the murals of Cave 17, the image of the Buddha is evidently Gandharan, with distinguishable facial outlines, dignified poise, and a smooth and natural draping of the garments around the body, lending a feeling of simplicity and elegance. The influence found expression not only in the figures, but also in the composition and decorative elements, showing the mysterious and charming aspects of foreign culture. Over the time, the Kizil Grotto murals absorbed quite a fair deal of Central Asian and Central Plains elements and became a unique Western style. Characters began to spread wide and started showing liveliness; sensory features and clothing had obvious local imprints. For instance, in Cave 38 murals, the image of the Buddha took a softer tone and became much more delicate, with the dress gradually conforming to Han style. This change not only demonstrates the wide range of cultural exchanges, but also reflects the artist's deep understanding of local culture and innovative spirit. The lotus grass decoration on the roofs of the caves, together with the imagery of clouds flying across the sky in the frescoes, are further symbols of this fusion, combining the geometric beauty of Central Asia with the delicate emotions of domestic China to form a unique visual language. Persian and Cornish literary influences are also reflected in the murals of the Kizil caves. For example, in some of the murals, the costumes and decorations of the figures are clearly Persian in style, such as ornate hair ornaments, intricate patterns, and vibrant colors. These literary elements not only enriched the expressive power of the murals, but also added to their exotic flavor.

5. Conclusion

Investigating the themes and styles of the murals in the Kizil Caves not only expands our knowledge of ancient Western regions in Buddhist art but also offers new ways of interpreting cultural exchanges on the Silk Road. The murals, displaying Buddhist themes, show the life and teachings of Buddha executed with delicate brushstrokes and vibrant colors, displaying spiritual depth in a manner that reveals the past; Secular themes, representing vividly social life and folk culture of the ancient Western Regions, echo beliefs and strives of people at that time; and lastly, Decorative themes, with their unique motifs and forms, reflect hybridization and innovation by various cultures. The murals are not only artistically consummate; they are also witnesses of history, providing valuable information to future generations for studying religion, culture, and social life in ancient Western Regions. Future research here should develop further strategies for the conservation and digitization of the murals to ensure that this rich cultural heritage is preserved and passed on for long.

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