
The Aesthetic Characteristics and Artistic Expression of the Figure Sculpture in the Kizil Grottoes in Xinjiang

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Abstract: As the central representative of the Kizil Grottoes in Xinjiang, the murals and sculptures in this complex integrate elements of Indian Buddhist art, Central Asian indigenous culture, and Central Plains artistic traditions, forming a distinctive artistic style. This study examines the Kizil Grottoes murals and sculptures, tracing their cultural origins to analyze aesthetic features in form, expression, and color. It explores the specific approaches of lines, composition, color, and techniques in artistic expression. The research reveals that the sculptures combine religious solemnity with the dynamic spirit of Central Asia, serving both the dissemination of Buddhist teachings and showcasing the creative wisdom of Kizil artisans. The paper aims to uncover the cultural significance and artistic value behind these sculptures, providing insights for the preservation and study of traditional grotto art.

Keywords: Kizil Grottoes; mural figure sculptures; aesthetic characteristics; artistic expression

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1. Introduction

Located in Baicheng County, Xinjiang, the Kizil Grottoes rank among China's earliest and largest Buddhist cave complexes, celebrated as a "treasure trove of art." The murals and sculptures within these grottoes, preserved for over a millennium, preserve invaluable historical and artistic records. They vividly illustrate the spread of Buddhist culture in the Western Regions while showcasing the fusion of Buddhist traditions with local Western Regions culture. Distinct from the cave sculptures of the Central Plains, the Kizil Grottoes' figures exhibit a strong Western Regions character, bearing traces of multicultural influences. These artworks adhere to Buddhist sculptural principles while incorporating the aesthetic sensibilities and artistic aspirations of the Kucha people. This paper analyzes the aesthetic characteristics and artistic expression of the statues in the light of the cultural background of the Kizil Grottoes, in order to provide some references for showing the unique artistic charm of the statues and filling the research gap in the aesthetic and artistic expression.

2. The Cultural Origin of the Figure Sculpture in the Kizil Grottoes

The creation of Kizil Grottoes' human figures is deeply rooted in the historical context of multicultural integration. During

the 1st century BCE, Buddhism spread to the Kucha region of the Western Regions via the Silk Road, while Indian Buddhist art simultaneously reached the East, providing foundational models for the grotto sculptures—including early depictions of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, along with religious symbols. As a key Silk Road hub and cultural nexus between East and West, Kucha's nomadic traditions and oasis civilization gradually merged with Buddhist artistry, developing a style that blended religious solemnity with everyday life. Local artisans subtly incorporated felt patterns characteristic of nomadic tribes and oasis motifs of fruits and vegetables into the figures' attire and backgrounds, infusing sacred Buddha statues with a sense of earthly warmth. By the Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties, artistic elements from Central China spread to the Western Regions through trade and cultural exchanges. Kucha artisans adopted techniques like line work and color coordination, enriching the sculptures' artistic depth. Through this collision and fusion of diverse cultures, the Kizil Grottoes' human figures transcended cultural boundaries, becoming a vital artistic testament to Silk Road cultural exchange^[1].

3. The Artistic Value of the Figure Sculpture in the Murals of Kizil Grottoes

3.1. The Concrete Value of Religious Art

The murals in the Kizil Caves stand as a pivotal example of early Buddhist art's concrete representation, visually conveying Buddhist doctrines and core values through tangible imagery. These sculptures served as cultural ambassadors when Buddhism first arrived in the region. As the earliest and largest cave complex in Xinjiang, the Kizil Caves showcase artistic creations centered around Buddha, Bodhisattvas, Flying Apsaras, and monks, embodying both ancient creativity and religious devotion. Buddha statues predominantly depict meditating figures with solemn expressions and minimalist clothing patterns, blending traditional Indian Buddhist traditions with local aesthetic preferences from the Western Regions. Abstract concepts like compassion and enlightenment are vividly expressed through the Buddha's serene postures. The Flying Apsaras, rather than rigid representations, display graceful movements and flowing robes that capture the Buddhist ideals of freedom and transcendence. These sculptures not only fulfilled ancient devotees' worship needs but also facilitated the widespread dissemination of Buddhist culture in the Western Regions, serving as crucial evidence of how Buddhist art transformed abstract teachings into tangible visual narratives. This creative approach of converting abstract concepts into concrete imagery provides invaluable references for later Buddhist cave sculptures^[2].

3.2. The Value of the Fusion of the Arts between the Western Regions and the Central Plains

The Kizil Grottoes' murals stand out for their remarkable fusion of Western Regions' indigenous art with Central Plains and ancient Indian traditions, creating a vivid tapestry of cultural interplay. Strategically positioned along the Silk Road as a cultural nexus, these sculptures masterfully blend diverse artistic influences while preserving the distinctive essence of Western Regions' artistry. The figures exhibit both Indian sculptural traits—broadly proportioned physiques, prominent noses, and expressive eyes—alongside Central Plains' nuanced facial details that avoid mechanical imitation, achieving natural harmony. Their attire harmonizes regional styles: the Western Regions' bold, fluid designs contrast with the Central Plains' meticulous, structured patterns. This synthesis showcases the bold spirit of nomadic peoples alongside the fluid grace of Chinese painting. The artworks transcend mere stylistic juxtaposition, instead forging a unique aesthetic through cultural synthesis. Bodhisattva figures, for instance, wear Western Regions' characteristic beads and crowns yet display Central Plains' gentle charm and Indian solemnity, vividly illustrating cross-cultural coexistence. These murals not only capture the vibrant energy of Silk Road exchanges but also provide invaluable physical evidence for studying the mutual influence between Eastern and Western art traditions^[3].

3.3. The Inheritance Value of Mural Art

The human figures in the Kizil Grottoes' murals embody the craftsmanship and aesthetic values of ancient Western Regions mural art. Their cultural legacy is unique and irreplaceable, laying a solid foundation for the development of

mural art in later generations. These murals achieved remarkable success in both creative techniques and aesthetic pursuits, not only standing as pinnacle works of local Western Regions art but also exerting significant influence on mural creations across northern grotto complexes. In terms of techniques, the Kizil Grottoes' figure sculptures primarily employ line drawing and color washes—simple yet expressive methods that capture character traits. Through variations in line density to outline figures, and through thickness and weight changes to convey expressions and fabric textures, these techniques were later adopted by sites like the Dunhuang Mogao Caves and Maijishan Grottoes, demonstrating the art's enduring impact. Aesthetically, the Kizil Grottoes' murals emphasize harmony between form and spirit, blending physical beauty with emotional depth^[4]. This innovative approach breaks conventional patterns, reflecting ancient artisans' passion for artistic excellence. Moreover, the sculptures preserve diverse artistic styles from different periods, clearly illustrating the evolution of Western Regions mural art from its early stages to maturity. These works provide invaluable physical evidence for studying the development and transmission of ancient Western Regions art, while also preserving aesthetic concepts and artistic spirit, offering crucial references for contemporary mural creation.

4. The Aesthetic Characteristics of the Figure Sculpture in the Murals of the Kizil Grottoes

4.1. Morphological Aesthetics

The sculptural aesthetics of the Kizil Grottoes' murals harmonize Buddhist norms with the dynamic spirit of Central Asian art. Buddha statues strictly adhere to the 32 marks of the Buddha and 80 marks of perfection, featuring upright postures with broad shoulders, slender waists, and well-proportioned figures. Their lines are executed with deliberate restraint, creating an organic sense of sacred solemnity without any trace of artificiality. Bodhisattva statues, however, transcend rigid conventions, their S-shaped curves embodying both grace and vitality—a blend of purity and tender beauty. The flying apsaras (celestial maidens) showcase distinct Central Asian characteristics: slender figures with flowing sleeves and outstretched limbs that seem to transcend the canvas, exuding unrestrained freedom. Secular figures, vividly portrayed with lifelike expressions, retain Kucha ethnic traits—full faces, robust physiques, and gestures that capture the essence of everyday life. This interplay of sacred and secular elements creates a visual language that balances Buddhist solemnity with earthly warmth, forming a unique aesthetic system where divine and human realms coexist^[5].

4.2. Aesthetic of Expression

The aesthetic essence of the Kizil Grottoes' human figures lies in their ability to convey emotions through spiritual expression, achieving harmony between form and spirit. The Buddha statues radiate serene calmness with gently drooping eyes, a peaceful countenance, and a faint smile at the corners of the mouth. This expression conveys a transcendent realm beyond worldly concerns, evoking awe and inner peace in viewers. Bodhisattva statues display tender compassion through their soft, earnest gazes that seem to sense the suffering of all beings, blending sacred mercy with compassionate warmth that bridges the psychological gap between the artwork and its audience. Celestial figures embody unrestrained freedom with expressive, dynamic features that capture the Western Regions' spirit of pursuing liberation. Secular figures exhibit natural authenticity—whether devoutly reverent, peacefully composed, or childlike in vitality—free from artificiality. Artists' precise portrayal of real-life emotions transforms these sculptures from cold stone walls into vivid, lifelike expressions that resonate deeply. Each figure's unique expression, while distinct in character, aligns with their spiritual essence, making the murals both vivid and emotionally resonant for viewers across centuries.

4.3. Color Aesthetics

The color aesthetics in the Kizil Grottoes' murals are characterized by vivid and intense hues that harmonize perfectly, showcasing the distinctive features of Western Regions art. The sculptures primarily use mineral pigments like ochre, azurite, malachite, and cinnabar, which retain their rich, deep tones even after thousands of years. The color scheme

emphasizes contrast and harmony: warm ochre tones contrast with the cool tones of azurite and malachite, creating both striking visual impact and a cohesive whole that enhances the three-dimensionality of the figures. Buddha and Bodhisattva statues predominantly feature bright yet solemn colors, with their garments adorned in elaborate yet orderly patterns to reflect their sacred status. The flying apsaras' colors are more dynamic and lively, often rendered in lighter hues that blend with the background, amplifying their ethereal grace. Secular figures are depicted in simple, natural tones that mirror everyday life, forming a well-balanced color system with clear priorities and appropriate intensity. This approach not only fulfills religious expression needs but also demonstrates unique color aesthetics.

5. The Artistic Expression Path of the Figure Sculpture in the Kizil Grottoes

5.1. Outline the Form and Spirit with Lines

Lines serve as the fundamental artistic medium in the Kizil Grottoes' mural sculptures. Craftsmen skillfully employ diverse line techniques to precisely capture the essence of human figures. Buddha and Bodhisattva statues predominantly combine upright, angular lines with graceful curves. Straight lines define the contours of the body, conveying solemn dignity, while curves depict clothing folds and body contours, adding a touch of fluid elegance. The gradual variations in line thickness harmonize with the figures' forms and textures, achieving a perfect balance of form and spirit. Beyond color, the line work in these sculptures demonstrates remarkable dynamism. The flying apsaras' lines feature ethereal curves, with sleeves depicted as flowing, continuous strokes that evoke the motion of air currents. Limbs are rendered with delicate yet powerful lines, showcasing both the apsaras' lightness and their free-spirited nature. Secular figures, on the other hand, exhibit simple, unadorned lines that capture their natural postures and attire. These lines not only reflect the subjects' daily lives but also convey emotional nuances through variations in weight and speed, enhancing the sculptures' realism and vitality. This line technique adheres to traditional painting methods while incorporating the aesthetic preferences of the Western Regions, ultimately forming a unique line artistry.

5.2. Creating the Picture's Artistic Connotation by Composition

The Kizil Grottoes murals masterfully employ compositional techniques to create rich visual narratives that fulfill both religious expression and aesthetic appeal. The sculptures predominantly adopt a central prominence approach, with Buddha statues positioned at the focal point. These central figures, proportionally larger than other characters and adorned with halo decorations, establish their primacy. Surrounding them are bodhisattvas, flying apsaras, and secular figures, forming a layered composition that evokes solemn religious reverence. Symmetrical designs feature bodhisattvas and apsaras symmetrically arranged along the central axis, where harmonious lines and colors create balanced harmony, embodying the disciplined beauty of religious artistry. Narrative murals employ scattered-point compositions, with figures distributed according to storylines through staggered arrangements and interplay of reality and abstraction. This technique ensures narrative integrity while generating dynamic visual narratives. The compositions also emphasize seamless integration between figures and backgrounds, often using simple elements like rocks, trees, and auspicious clouds. These elements not only highlight the sculptures but also expand spatial depth, immersing viewers in the scenes and enhancing the artwork's emotional impact.

5.3. Using Color to Transfer Visual Tension

Color serves as a vital artistic medium in the Kizil Grottoes' murals, not only enhancing aesthetic appeal but also conveying powerful visual impact and emotional depth. The artisans skillfully employed mineral pigments, manipulating light and shade, density, and warm-cold contrasts to create three-dimensional textures and layered compositions. This technique transformed the flat, monotonous figures into visually striking sculptures. The Buddha's halo is predominantly rendered in rich hues like earth red and golden yellow, layered through gradual shading. This technique not only accentuates the sacred aura but also establishes a clear focal point, allowing viewers to instantly perceive the Buddha's

solemnity and divinity. Bodhisattva figures showcase opulent color schemes, blending azurite blue, malachite green, and earth red. This harmonious combination reflects their revered status while conveying gentleness and serenity. The flying apsaras are depicted using contrasting techniques: lighter colors for sleeves and darker accents for skin and ornaments, vividly capturing their ethereal grace and adding dynamism to the composition. Secular figures feature understated, minimalist colors that contrast with the vibrant religious imagery. This deliberate contrast not only distinguishes different roles but also enriches the visual hierarchy, achieving a perfect balance between visual impact and emotional expression.

5.4. Interpretation of Religious Connotation by Technique

The artistic techniques in the Kizil Grottoes' murals consistently revolve around interpreting religious themes, achieving a seamless fusion of artistic expression and Buddhist doctrines. The most representative technique is the shading method, where artisans employ the "convex-concave technique" to apply color gradients on facial features and limbs. This creates three-dimensional forms through subtle light and shadow transitions, aligning with the aesthetic preferences of the Western Regions people while enhancing the sacred realism of Buddha and Bodhisattva statues, conveying the solemnity of Buddhist art. The line work in Kizil Grottoes sculptures is intricately linked to religious symbolism. Religious figures exhibit clean, flowing lines that balance strength and gentleness, embodying a sublime and pure aura. Secular figures, on the other hand, feature natural, unadorned lines reflecting everyday life, demonstrating Buddhism's compassionate mission to liberate all beings. Beyond this, artisans use detailed depictions to convey religious meanings—such as Buddha's hand gestures, Bodhisattvas' jeweled necklaces, and celestial beings' ritual instruments. Each element carries specific religious symbolism, enriching the artistic depth of the sculptures while accurately interpreting Buddhist teachings. This technique of serving religious content through artistic expression not only elevates the Kizil Grottoes' sculptures to high artistic value but also establishes them as vital vehicles for spreading Buddhist culture.

6. Conclusion

The Kizil Grottoes' murals, as a cultural treasure of Western Regions cave art, showcase the fusion of diverse cultures through their aesthetic and artistic expressions, while reflecting the creative ingenuity of Kucha artisans. These sculptures harmonize religious solemnity with secular vitality in form, expression, and color. Their masterful use of lines, composition, and techniques not only interprets Buddhist teachings with precision but also creates a distinctive artistic style. More than just masterpieces, they stand as vital testaments to cultural exchanges along the Silk Road, providing invaluable physical evidence for studying ancient Western Regions culture and the spread of Buddhist art. To fully unlock this millennia-old artistic legacy, we must continue decoding its cultural codes, allowing this timeless treasure to flourish anew in the modern era.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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