

MISCELLANEA

The Mellon Digitisation Project at the British Museum

Over three hundred fragile and very rare paintings on silk and paper are preserved in the Stein Collection at the Department of Oriental Antiquities of the British Museum. This is without doubt the most important material collected during Sir Aurel Stein's expeditions together with the manuscripts that were originally kept in a secret cave temple at the Thousand Buddha Caves near Dunhuang, in Gansu Province, western China. The sheer volume and the extremely good condition of the material preserved by the desert climate makes this find unparalleled in the world for the study of the medieval period of China and Central Asia. Dunhuang is an ancient oasis town, located where the northern and southern branches of the Silk Road united to lead to the then Chinese capital Chang'an today known as Xi'an. Some time in the eleventh century the carefully packed bundles of manuscripts and paintings were put into a small cave and sealed off by a wall, which was then painted to blend in with the decoration of the neighbouring bigger cave temple. It was only in about 1900 that a Daoist monk who looked after the by then abandoned site accidentally found the entrance to the small cave. Aurel Stein, closely followed by Paul Pelliot and others, came to Dunhuang in the first decade of the twentieth century. As the result of these expeditions much

of the material ended up in European and Japanese collections. Later the Chinese authorities too realised the importance of the find and ordered the remaining manuscripts to be transported to Peking, where they are today in the National Library.

The Dunhuang material obtained by Sir Aurel Stein during his second (1906–1908) and third expeditions (1913–1916) was sent to England. In the early 1920s it was divided, with two-fifths remaining in London, and three-fifths being transferred to India and now housed in the National Museum, New Delhi. When the British Library separated from the British Museum in 1973 the paintings, textiles, sculptures and other objects were retained by the Museum.

Arthur Waley's detailed descriptive but unillustrated catalogue of the paintings was published in 1931. A large portfolio of colour plates appeared in 1921, introduced by Laurence Binyon. Roderick Whitfield published the most comprehensive and lavishly illustrated catalogue in 1982–1983 (Roderick Whitfield: *The Art of Central Asia – The Stein Collection in the British Museum*, Tokyo: Kodansha, vols 1–2) with a third volume devoted to the remaining Stein material. A short catalogue, which accompanied the last major exhibition, could only present the most important paintings (Roderick Whitfield and Anne Farrer: *Caves of the Thousand Buddhas, Chinese Art from the Silk Route*,

London: British Museum Publications 1990). All of these are now out-of-print.

The lack of easily accessible catalogues coincides with growing demand for the paintings to be made accessible to researchers and the general public. In the last decades a completely new field of study, coined Dunhuangology, or *Dunhuang xue* in Chinese, has sprung up, and the pressure on the important collections of Dunhuang paintings, manuscripts and artefacts to show the fragile and light sensitive material on a regular basis has become overwhelming. With the growing interest in the Silk Road, Central Asia and Buddhism Dunhuang itself has now become a thriving tourist centre with its own airport. As a consequence there is also a growing demand for the wider availability of good reproductions of the paintings for popular and scholarly publications.

Now with the help of digital technology it will become possible to study the scattered Dunhuang material together – in a virtual form. One of the most important pilot projects of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation based in New York, USA is the creation of the “Mellon International Dunhuang Archive” in collaboration with the Dunhuang Research Academy in China, Sarah Fraser from Northwestern University and libraries and museums around the world. One of the main objectives of this project is through digital photography to re-connect, virtually, the wall paintings in the cave temples in Dunhuang with the portable paintings, manuscripts and textiles once also in Dunhuang, but now dispersed in many different countries.

Work on the digitisation of the tens of thousands of manuscripts in the British Library is well under way. The idp web-page (<http://idp.bl.uk>) gives easy access to the tens of thousands of manuscripts and manuscript fragments that are already accessible on their web-site.

The one-year digitisation project was the first of its kind in the British Museum. Several departments were collaborating throughout the year. The project is managed by Carol Michael-

son, Assistant Keeper at the Department of Oriental Antiquities and the day-to-day co-ordination, scheduling and approval of Phase One was my task. The photography of some of the Dunhuang paintings poses special challenges to the photographers, and digital photography has provided the technical solution. Some of the paintings are very large: almost three meters by three meters in size. Others are hanging scrolls about four meters long: these were probably originally made to hang from the gravel cliff face at Dunhuang. Several of these paintings and some long handscrolls were photographed in their entirety for the first time as part of this project.

The pictures were taken with a traditional camera using a digital back. Their excellent quality makes it possible to zoom-in to see the smallest detail at twice the size of the original. In the case of the long handscrolls and banners the individual shots taken will be stitched together in the Museum’s New Media Unit, allowing the possibility of scrolling through the entire image for the first time. Most of the several hundred fragments also brought back by Stein have never been published before, and are available for specialist research for the first time. It is known that in several cases fragments belonging to paintings now in New Delhi or in Paris are in the British Museum collection, and it will be possible to reunite these parts by computer technology. Chinese scholars will be able to study the inscriptions and details in hitherto unprecedented clarity in China itself, where the digital images will be accessible.

A tour consisting of about 60 paintings are accessible to all interested on the Museum’s COMPASS web-site (www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/compass). In Phase Two, which started in April 2003, the textiles and selected three dimensional sculptures and objects brought back by Stein will also be digitised. It is hoped that at a later stage all remaining objects will be digitally photographed and made accessible on the British Museum’s web-page.

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