

How asian art has contributed to the history of global art

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How Asian Art Has Contributed to Global Art History:

Decorative Motifs and Ornamentations in the Yungang Caves

Beautifully sculpted caves from the 5th century, the Yungang caves are an important part of Chinese and Buddhist culture. Started along the silk road, created as a result of Buddhist persecution, there are 52 caves, as of today.

With the survival of over 50, 000 statues and 52 caves to go through, there is an abundant amount of decorations and motifs to study, throughout.

Mainly focusing on repeating motifs like the lotus blossom, animals, floral scrolls, trees and mountains, we can classify the Yungang decorations and patterns into two large categories, according to Mizuno and Nagahiro from Kyoto University: 1) constructive decorations, and 2) decorative patterns with no relation to construction. In other words, decorations that hold a physical function within the caves, and decorations that exist purely for style and look. Moving forward, we will analyze found research essays and texts, focusing on the symbolism and purpose of decorative motifs and ornamentation within the Yungang Caves.

Problems arise when studying caves like those of Yungang. Due to aging and weather damage, plundering and terrorist acts, it is hard to collect all the information of Yungang and its history. Therefore, there are problems when studying the 'entrance' of decorations, dating, and categorizing where the style originated from. However, based on found texts written by monks occupying the caves at the time and our understand of Asian art from India and Afghanistan, scholars can make educated assumptions, of which we will analyze in this paper.

Following Mizuno and Nagahiro's study on the caves and their different structures, we will discuss Niches. They are an essential part of architectural decoration within the caves. The origin of arches niches is discussed by the cited authors; the origin is found at the entrances of Indian cave-temples. Here, arches pointed like lotus petals are common and found regularly. During the Gandhāra period, niches became frequently occupied by divine images. These were referred to as " Buddha niches." They were so common, in fact, that it became normal for there to be Buddha niches on each step of the base of a stupa. The niches found in Gandhāra can also be categorized in terms of style/complexity. They can be: simplified, pillared, or more complicated, closely resembling the originals. As far as where they evolved from, studies point to China as the origin. This can be traced back to trabeated niches, originally made to represent an edifice. Because of this, it is considered a Chinese adaption, as opposed to an entirely new design.

The coffered ceilings of the Yungang Caves are another decorative piece of the caves which we will look at. The triangular corbelling - " a weight-bearing structuring principle whose earliest instance can be found in fifth-millennium-BC domed burial chambers" - was imported from the west, perhaps originating from a kind of arched niche, like those of the Tun-huang caves. & Here, we see the problem of dating in action. " It is difficult to determine whether the coffered ceiling existed from the remote times or was imported from somewhere else," says Kyoto professors, Mizuno and Nagahimo.

Although the triangular corbelling can be placed, unfamiliarity and such cause for considerable alterations being unavoidable in the carving process.

These ceiling decorative motifs are associated with the West and the

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canopies and nimbuses from there, all accessory to Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. When examined, those from Central Asia and Gandhāra are found to have had trapezoidal frames like those of Yungang canopies. The addition of this is the so-called 'onion-head.' Only seen in later Gandhāra period cave excavations, mainly in Afghanistan and the Middle East, chevron patterns and flame designs along outer borders is intermittently found. To focus on the chevron pattern, we can note that the decorative style, along with flame designs, represent brilliant light.

Moving forward, we will discuss thrones and the decors surrounding these additions to the caves. There are lotus thrones, Sumeru thrones, and lion thrones. These thrones are extremely elaborate in style and décor. This could be attributed to Buddhist monks trying to better 'market' the religion in China, in order to convert more people and grow the ideology. Sources say that, although further investigation is needed to determine whether or not the style of these thrones were a sudden appearance in Yungang, or if it had already existed in a different region of the world.

Two of the most used decorative motifs are the lotus and floral motifs. The animal motif is rarely seen. It is clear that the lion motif - part of the animal motif category outlined by Mizuno and Nagahiro - came from Indian art, dating as far back as the Maurya period. It could also be attributed to other Middle Eastern countries, i. e. modern day Iran. In his book, "The Art and Architecture of India," Rowlandson talks about how the West adopted Iranian and Afghanistan art techniques, customs, and motifs. This could be linked to Yungang art in China and the repeated motifs seen throughout the caves.

Although Mizuno refer to art in Yungang as fresh and originally Chinese.

However, one cannot deny the evidence dating the same motifs and themes to Middle Eastern work.

Because the animal motifs, although interesting and in possession of a rich Middle Eastern history, seldom appear, we will focus on the popular lotus and floral motif décor. A design originating from the West, the lotus pedal band characterizes the unique Yungang style. What classifies it as Western can be attributed to the following: diagonally placed patterns in horizontally arranged quadrangles, diagonally arranged squares, “ suggesting diaper patterns.” Although the repeated patterns are scarce in the West, these deviations from the original style emphasize China’s ability to completely re-appropriate an entire artistic style to the point that it is entirely new and fresh. These wavy floral scrolls, repeated throughout the caves, existed in India long before appearing in the Yungang caves. Visually, the scrolls were vibrant and delightful to look at. The ivory carving of Bēgrām, for example, is staggeringly Sāncī style. This style shows the leaves turning back into the space, achieving, almost entirely, the shape of the half-palmette of Yungang. While professors Mizuno and Nagahiro acknowledge that the repeated half-palmettes are rare in the West, they note that the wall paintings of Kizil have two variations of this. For example, in Hippocampus Cave and Red-Cupola Cave. To us, this means that the leaves are presented in full view and in perspective. These flat representations resemble, quite closely, those in Yungang, implying that the style was passed down, and reborn in the Yungang Caves.

To provide further evidence of the floral motif coming from the West, let's focus on another aspect of the motif and from where it originated.

Specifically, we will concern ourselves with the pattern of linked circles with palmettes. To elaborate, there are wall paintings in Kizil, many of which hold examples of linked sidewise and some complicated and realistic, holding animal or human figures in each circle. We should take special note of found circlelink motifs found in wall paintings of Tun-huang caves, "undulating floral scrolls and linked circles of half-palmette." These images in the Tun-huang caves are relevant to note because of their similarities to those in Yungang. We must – with great caution – continue to study these images and as we go along discovering the parallels in global art, we must take care to make smart and accurate attributions.

The aforementioned qualities of the floral motif point towards their originating from the West. However, as we move on and discuss animal motifs found in the Yungang caves, we will see that this is not the case. From Rowland, we know that lions seen on the right and left of images are from the West, undoubtedly. The lion figures from Shotorak in Afghanistan, as a matter of fact, resemble those of Yungang. Once again, we see a consistent and concise connection between the art of the West and the decorative motifs of Yungang. They also appear in art from the Han period of China. Besides lions, dragons, tigers, birds and other animals show up on the arch-ends in the Yungang caves. No animal designs like those in Yungang, more closely resembling Han and Wei dynasty art, appear in known Western art, to this day. This means we can, for now, conclude with some confidence that these motifs did not originate in the West.

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The combined knowledge we've discussed so far is very telling about the decorative motifs and ornamentation style for the Yungang caves. Perhaps best described by Mizuno and Nagahiro, the ornamentation of Yungang:

Follows the flow of the Buddhist decorative motif of India... its mode of expression approximates Gandhāra more closely than India, and Central Asia more closely than Gandhāra. Accordingly, the Yungang cave-temples received direct influence from the various parts of Central Asia, which is geographically close.

All of this information is important and in need of further study; we still have important questions to ask, such as: "how did these ornamentations appear first at Yungang?" or "how were these ornamentations and motifs appropriate by the Chinese artists and cave builders, creating what is now the unique Chinese art of the Yungang caves?" of Buddhist ornamentation from the first and second centuries, there is very little confirmed facts. However, some speculation is called for and can be made from the early use and form of canopies, studied under the context of the Yungang caves.

The importation of Buddhist art from Western and Middle Eastern cultures and countries created a revolution of sorts in ancient Chinese art. The style of sculptures and architecture of this age are clearly evident throughout the Yungang Caves. The floral pattern plays a significant role, as it is repeated vastly throughout the caves, pointing us towards Western art styles and techniques. Moreover, the animal décor and motifs are from the other end of the spectrum, as they are Middle Eastern in origin, according to renowned Indian Buddhist art history scholar, Benjamin Rowlandson.

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We see that in diffusion of culture, cultural traits never maintain their original forms. This means, to us, that as a culture or style is spread out and shared with other cultures and civilizations, the original form will morph and evolve until it is unrecognizable. For this reason, we must continue to study ancient art from all over the world; through further study and the the sharing of found information, we can make new and exciting discoveries. Because of natural damage, cave robbers, terrorist acts and other unfortunate elements out of our control, we may never fully understand the Yungang Caves or their function, history, or narrative. But we can continue to work and study and learn until we are satisfied. After all, understanding the past is the key to a rewarding present, and bright future.