

The Narrative Techniques in Chinese Buddhism Mural “The Deer King Jataka”

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Abstract: This paper researches the art techniques used in a Chinese mural “The Deer King Jataka” to explore the narrative elements and methods in this work. The paper focuses on clarifying painting techniques of the mural especially through the layout, composition, color, and cultural style. After that, the paper discusses how such techniques influence viewers’ understandings of the mural, and followed by the explanation of the content. By clarifying and then comparing the techniques to their practices in the work, it is easier for readers to understand the methods, and link the information mentioned to the work when appreciating. The paper not only shows the basic Buddhism ideas of art and culture, but also includes my own conceptions of art to further investigate the thesis.

Keywords: Mural “The Deer King Jataka”, Buddhism, Dunhuang Mural, Narrative.

1. Introduction

Mural “The Deer King Jataka” (Figure 1), located in the 257th grotto of Dunhuang Mogao Grottos, was painted according to the Jiuselujing [1], which means “The Scripture of the Nine Color Deer.”



Figure 1. “The Deer King Jataka”.

“The Deer King Jataka” was created during the North Wei Dynasty (386-534 C.E), and depicted a preexistence story of Shakyamuni, the founder of Buddhism, as a deer with nine colors on its body. Such preexistence stories of Buddhas are called Jataka [2] stories in Buddhism scriptures.

Murals of Jataka stories usually depict complete stories with the developments of plots. As a result, narrative techniques are very important to help viewers understand the stories. As one of the most classical and essential Mural in Dunhuang, or even the Buddhism history, “The Deer King Jataka” reflects the spread of Buddhism from India to inland China; the decoration of characters involves Indian and Persia styles; the colors and paints uses a traditional and typical Chinese technique called

“Aotu” [3]. All of the significances above support that “The Deer King Jataka” is meaningful to be studied for narrative in Jataka murals.

In the paper, three painting techniques are clarified: 1 the layout of the structure. 2 the dividing methods that separate and connect each part of the mural. 3 the scatter point (or cavalier) perspective. The paper also demonstrates how the three techniques practice in the narrative of “The Deer King Jataka” and the actual story of “The Deer King Jataka.”

2. The Layout of the Structure

“The Deer King Jataka”, as a story-telling mural, deals well with the concept of time to illustrate narrative by using a special separation layout on a horizontal long roll.

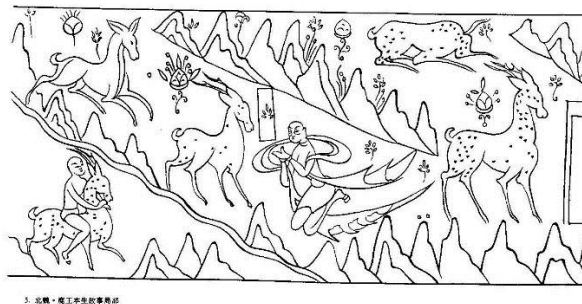


Figure 2.



Figure 3.

As examples of Figure 2 and Figure 3 (outlines of parts of the complete work) show, the mural contains several independent minor parts, and each part represents an individual plot happened in different time frame of the story. The separation and the independence of each piece of the work make the inconsistency of time possible on a two-dimensional mural. However, each piece of the work still has strong connection to the piece near it, so when viewers combine all of them together, they can obtain a complete Jataka story. This technique is very similar to today’s “manga” or comic books, but it was already popular in 5th century’s Buddhism mural painting in China.

One point that make this mural special compare to other works using the same technique is the way of viewing this mural. The plots are not developed simply from left to right as viewers’ eyes normally see, yet the plots develop from both sides of the mural towards the middle. Two “branches” of plots develop independently from both sides of the mural converge when approaching each other and give us the ending. The left side of the work depicts the Devaloka (pure world of bliss) because of the existence of Nine Colored deer, and the right side depicts the mortal world [4]. In addition to carefully indicating the causes and results of the story, such method of narrative also helps viewers distinguish the characteristics of both worlds and creates a sense of time passing, providing more opportunities for viewers to think and digest the content.

3. The Dividing Methods Separating Each Section

“The Deer King Jataka” uses mountains (Figure 4) as dividers to separate each part of the mural to make the plots independent from each other, and avoid the chaotic of disordered objects all mixing together. These mountain shape dividers serve also as perfect decorations in the mural not only because this Jataka story actually took place in the wild but also China already has a long tradition of painting mountains and waters.



Figure 4.



Figure 5.

Nevertheless, as a Buddhism masterpiece, the dividers in “The Deer King Jataka” are tools to control the rhythm of the narrative as well. These dividers extend from top left to bottom right, showing the rolling of the mountains, and symbolizing the up and down of the plots.

Furthermore, mountains also offer the scene with vitality and momentum. The plot reaches its climax also followed by the dynamic of the mountains. The number of mountains changes when needed. To be more specific, the number of mountains decreases from left to right, cooperated with the graph and character, softly creates the transitions between plots [5]. The fewer number of mountains as divider indicates the coherence of plots at the right part of the mural, which is the mortal world owned by the king and the queen.

Another point is the color contrast between divider and the background. “The Deer King Jataka” has a strong warm orange-red color for background shown in Figure 5. On the contrary, the mountain dividers’ use obviously opposite cold colors including green, black, white and blue. The contradistinction in colors set a clear boundary between different pieces of the work and remind viewers the transition of the narrative.

4. Scatter Point (Cavalier) Perspective

In China, especially Dunhuang, most of the murals including “The Deer King Jataka” were painted in scatter Perspective. A work of scatter perspective depicts an entire scene of a place even though our eyes probably cannot get such a large range of imagine [6]. It is not limited by our eye range. Any objects of a scenario can be recorded no matter what angle they locate. This is also way many Chinese art works, including “The Deer King Jataka” are usually very long horizontally. If focus perspective works are pictures from a normal camera, scatter point perspective art works are pictures from a Panoramic camera.

Using scatter point perspective, characters in “The Deer King Jataka” have more spaces of motions, and do not need to worry about the dislocation. This makes the objects in the mural look more natural without shadows and lights. Nevertheless, viewers’ sights and perceives are not restricted by art theories. Although the objects were not painted accurately according to the relation between location

and size, they still do not look stiff or awkward because scatter perspective is able to make the depictions of every object precisely in detail.



Figure 6.

Scatter perspective also expresses sense of completion and integrity. Since the scatter perspective do not have to be exact on physical truths of space, each part of the mural can contain a large number of objects such as flowers, and these objects can fill almost all the blanks of the mural (Figure 6). The fullness of objects expresses a sense of urgency and therefore pushes the development of plots. Viewers are attracted to the massive details and make the narrative successful, too.

5. Actual Story of “The Deer King Mural” Based on the Scriptures

The Pali Buddhism scripture that is still preserved today, “Jataka Scripture”, was written in the 5th century, containing 547 Jataka stories [7], and “The Deer King Jataka” is a mural based on one of the stories. One of the two earliest Chinese versions of the Deer King sotry is the “Xiufan Deer King Jataka” by one of the most famous Buddhism sutra scholar Kang Zenghui. Another version is the “Jiuselujing” by Zhi Qian that already mentioned previously in the paper. However, both Zhi Qian and Kang Zenghui’s passages are similar [8] but too old to be understood, so another contemporary scholar Chang Renxia paraphrased the story in his article “Jiuselu” [9].

By reading “Jiuselu” as a reference, we know that “The Deer King Jataka” includes seven major parts and each part tells one plot in a different time frame [10]. Starting from the left as Figure 7 and 8 shown, the Deer King saved a man called Diaoda from the Ganges River, and Diaoda kneels to appreciate and swear to not betray the Deer King, or otherwise, Diaoda will die for the unloyalty.



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

Then we go to the right side of the mural because two plots develop together. The queen tells the king that she wants the Deer King’s leather (Figure 9). The king decides to reward the person who give clues about the Deer King. The greedy Diaoda therefore betrays the Deer King and tells where

the Deer King is (Figure 10), and the King sends his army to catch the Deer King (Figure 11). As a result, Diaoda dies with many wounds in his body because of his swear (Figure 12). Fortunately, the Deer King explains to the King how it saves a human but get betrayed, so the king does not kill the Deer King but honors its quality. (Figure 13)



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13

6. Conclusion

The “Deer King Jataka” uses three major narrative techniques: separation layouts, high contrast mountain shapes divider, and scatter perspective to depict a Jataka story between human and animals. Throughout the great skills of such techniques, the mural presents a clear and concrete illustration that helps Buddhism believers better understand the scripture. The narrative reveals the perverseness and evilness in human mind and teaches viewers the importance of kindness and loyalty.

Dunhuang has a great amount of murals, and “The Deer King Jataka” is one of the most typical murals in Dunhuang which really worth us to be studied. Many elements and points in “The Deer King Jataka” are examples that also exist on other painting, so researching this mural is hopefully helpful in future studies that involve similar themes. Hope the knowledges obtained in this paper can be applied when starting a new project.

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