

The Importance of Dunhuang Art in the Art Education of Primary Schools

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Abstract: *Dunhuang art is preserved as a splendid epitome of millennial art, and is a model of traditional Chinese art. In terms of the aesthetic value, it symbolizes a strong discourse for the great revival of Chinese culture. At present, art education in elementary schools has reached the peak of attention. Emphasis should be placed on the connotation and essence of excellent Chinese traditional culture while the import of Western art has brought in new vitality. As art education is an important way to cultivate correct aesthetics of the students, the integration of Dunhuang art in elementary school art education can further promote the inheritance and development of traditional culture. This paper puts emphasize on highlighting and analyzing the positive significance of Dunhuang art to elementary school art education.*

Keywords: *Dunhuang art; art education in elementary schools; positive significance*

1. Introduction

In accordance with the art curriculum standards, the art learning style of elementary school art teaching is divided into four learning areas: “modeling · performance”, “design · application”, “appreciation · commentary” and “synthesis · exploration”. The learning areas are intertwined and closely interrelated, forming an open art education. The all-encompassing art of Dunhuang plays a specific role in these four learning areas.

2. Learning area of “modeling performance”

The learning area of “modeling performance” is the essential element of art learning, where creativity is the primary focus, and experimentation with different materials and tools is the main focus. The Dunhuang Caves feature 45,000 square meters of frescoes and hundreds of paintings on streamers and silks. In terms of subject matter, there are Buddhist stories, karma stories, jataka stories, and historical stories, a large portion of which presented in the form of comic strips that serve to enlighten students’ imaginations. Moreover, the paintings contain a large number of figures, gods and ghosts, architectural traffic and decorative patterns. The painting style incorporates the characteristics of various countries and regions, such as, Central Asia, West Asia and Islam, etc., and also reflects the characteristics of traditional folk art.

Line is a fundamental means of creating beauty of art and is the basic language of traditional Chinese painting. Different types of line drawing techniques provide a completely different visual experience, and all Dunhuang frescoes are characterized by accurate modeling and smooth line drawing. In the earliest days of Han and Jin art, Dunhuang frescoes were painted with simple, strong, plain and rigid lines, while in the Tang dynasty, the soft exterior and rigid interior of the orchid leaf depictions reflect the pure and refined use of lines. (Figure 1)

A variety of colored rocks and minerals are mainly used in Dunhuang in line with local conditions, (made by crushing, filtering, rinsing, drying and then making stone powder pigments and painting them.) On account of the natural conditions and dry climate, and the fact that natural mineral pigments remain even more stable than modern chemical pigments, they retain their beauty of color after thousands of years, though slightly faded. Dunhuang frescoes have inherited the traditional laws of color assignment and absorbed the nutrients of Western color application at the same time to enrich Dunhuang techniques. After more than 1,000 years, Dunhuang frescoes show different color characteristics at different times. The early period of Dunhuang frescoess were mostly in earthy red,

with green, white, green, vermilion and ochre, presenting a plain warm tone. Subsequently, influenced by the Aotufa Painting Technique, Dunhuang frescoes became more multi-layered in color and more three-dimensional in their figures. The development of staining endowed the color of Dunhuang fresco of the Tang Dynasty with the quality of luxury and elegance[1].

In primary school art education, teachers can use Dunhuang murals as teaching resources, combining mural structures, patterns, colors, and other aspects to create art courses with unique living characteristics, allowing students to fully appreciate the beauty of Dunhuang while learning knowledge.



Figure 1: Mogao Caves, the Bricks with White Tiger Pattern, the Western Jin Dynasty

3. Learning area of “design · application”

This area of study covers both the concepts and methods of modern design and the content focuses on the basics of art and design. With its unique formal beauty, the Dunhuang frescoes present a large number of complementary color contrasts, color pairs, contrasts of warm and cold tones, purity contrasts, and brightness contrasts, which bring a strong visual enjoyment to the audience. The drawing of the deer in the Dunhuang frescoes *The Nine-Colored Deer* (Figure 2) takes advantage of a simple and vivid silhouette style, allowing students to experience a simplified approach to modeling and a sense of its design. The Dunhuang fresco caisson ceiling is regarded as a unique decorative part of the interior roofs of ancient Chinese buildings. The exquisite patterns of the caisson ceiling are the most formal of the Dunhuang art patterns (Figure 3), with the theme pattern drawn in the center and other patterns unfolding around it. The picture is rich in changes, both static and dynamic, with a very clever combination, creating an artistic effect of symmetry and unity. The patterns of caisson ceiling involve a range of compositional methods, and by means of these patterns, students are able to fully experience the beauty of art and design forms which enrich their design knowledge, and improve their aesthetic skills. The learning area of “design · application” also is comprised of an appreciation of the ideas, means and methods of traditional craftsmanship[2].

The production of Dunhuang frescoes and painted sculptures is on the basis of the original Han and Jin art traditions, absorbing and integrating techniques from India and other places to develop stone powder painting and colorful clay sculpture with local characteristics. Dunhuang frescoes have gone through a complex process of conglomerate precipice, wheat straw mud layer, grain bran mud layer, loam layer, lime and then finally stone powder coloring. As Dunhuang rock is not suitable for sculpting, ancient artisans created strong and durable clay sculptures through a unique process of skeletonizing, clay-making, shaping and coloring based on local conditions. Dunhuang frescoes and sculptures, with their distinctive national beauty, are still revealing their glorious beauty today, thanks to their appropriate use of the laws and rules of formal beauty.

In school art education, social resources can be utilized to invite art masters, connect to Dunhuang Museum, and other online exchanges, enriching the fun of the course and also supplementing the lack of professionalism.



Figure 2: Mogao Caves, Cave 257, *The Nine-colored Deer*, Northern Wei



Figure 3: Mogao Caves, Cave 120, *the glorious age of Tang Dynasty*

4. Learning area of “appreciation · commentary”

The learning area of “appreciation · commentary” revolves around students’ ability to feel, appreciate, and express themselves in a way that allows them to grasp the gist of the most basic methods of art appreciation and to develop their aesthetic view. In art education, aesthetic education is indispensable, focusing on the cultural value of Chinese art and improving students’ aesthetic ability. History is the best textbook, and so is beauty. Dunhuang art is primarily on the fundamental of the representation of Buddhist content, not only demonstrating the incomparable richness of content and the remarkable skills of our ancient painters, but also reflecting the lives of various ethnic groups and classes from the Northern and Southern Dynasties to the Yuan Dynasty. It is an important subject matter for getting well acquainted with the history of various ethnic groups. Mural painting, clay sculpture and architecture echo and influence each other, and frescoes play a role in decorating and beautifying buildings and complementing sculpture. Students is capable of appreciating it to peek into the history, folkways, folk customs, and culture of this region and enrich their knowledge of ancient history, and the change in art aesthetics of regarding obesity as beauty in the Northern Wei, thinness in the Western Wei, and then obesity in the Tang. By appreciating Dunhuang art, students are guided to relate their knowledge of local geography, history, and folklore to appreciate the content themes and stylistic changes in Dunhuang art, and to understand the artworks in their cultural context. Taking Dunhuang art as an example, teachers can enable students to truly and comprehensively learn the rich content of art from listening, watching, and touching traditional art through exhibitions, videos, and imitations. After appreciating art works, students can express their feelings through discussions, conversations, speeches, and other forms[3].

5. Learning area of “synthesis · exploration”

The vital procedure that involves in the learning area of “synthesis · exploration” lies in the integration of art and other disciplines in order to harmonize the physical and mental development of students. Dunhuang art stands for a fount of disciplines that encompasses not only religion, history, language, literature, ethnicity and other liberal arts disciplines, but also mathematics, medicine, astronomy and other science disciplines. Take the long-lost ancient books for an example, there maintains a large number of them in Dunhuang documents, such as the *Thousand Character Classic* and the *Enlightenment*, which are categorized as children’s books for literacy. Dunhuang is also known

as the home of “Zhisuo”, and as early as the Han and Jin dynasties, there already existed two great calligraphers in Dunhuang, that is, Zhang Zhi and Suo Jing. The Mogao Caves contain tens of thousands of original volumes of calligraphy, which provide valuable information for the study of the history of Chinese Calligraphy. Dunhuang frescoes contain a large number of dance images, which are precious materials for the study of Chinese music and dance and the restoration of Dunhuang dance. The dance drama *Silk Road* brings the dances on the Dunhuang frescoes back to life. The architecture of the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang is an art of cave architecture in a variety of forms. The cave form of the Mogao Caves is characterized by the Indian cave form, but in the meanwhile, it has developed the most exemplary Dunhuang form with a central stupa pillar on the grounds of the geological characteristics of the local sand structure.(figure 4)The three-dimensional caves and flat frescoes display the effect of a spectacular and unified formation. The culture of Dunhuang has endured for nine dynasties, and it is a good example of the inclusive nature of Chinese culture. In primary school art education, the richness and comprehensiveness of Dunhuang art can be used to teach and research together with teachers of other disciplines, such as the integration of art, music, and Chinese, to create an Art Nouveau curriculum to better promote the all-round development of students[4].



Figure 4: The Nine story tower of Mogao Caves, Cave 120, Tang Dynasty

6. The positive significance of the Silk Road spirit embodied in Dunhuang art in art education in elementary school

Art education in elementary schools should also play a role in enhancing students' ardent feelings and sense of responsibility for nature and human society and in developing and expanding excellent Chinese culture. The promulgation of the new version of compulsory education curriculum plan and curriculum standards clarifies the specific requirements for cultivating new talents of the times, and must promote the cultivation of new talents with both moral integrity and talent. The spirit of the Silk Road is a kind of patriotic sentiment that is passed down from generation to generation. Integrating the spirit of the Silk Road into art education in elementary schools is a profound reflection of enhancing students' literacy sentiments and core socialist values [5].

Dunhuang is the key point of the Silk Road, and Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty and Zhang Qian are a couple of figures in the Dunhuang culture that must be mentioned in the relationship as the king and minister. During the reign of Emperor Wu, the king sent Zhang Qian to the West twice to open the Silk Road, making it become a road of trade and exchange. In face of all kinds of threats and temptations, Zhang Qian never forgot his mission and national integrity, and proceeded with his journey all the way to the west, standing exposure, deprivation and hunger, and completed the diplomatic journey to the West under extremely harsh conditions. Zhang Qian's trip to the West vastly strengthened the connection with the Western region and established a direct link between China, Central Asia and Southern Europe. He is the pioneer of the Silk Road and is known as the “Columbus of the East”, whose persistence in exploration and dedication is worth learning from.

By the time when the Dunhuang Sutra Caves reappeared in 1900, Dunhuang that was under an untamed situation could not resist the ambitious artists snatching away the artifacts and suffered the horrible circumstance of theft and destruction by countless robbers and thieves. Countless groups of Dunhuang guardians have fought to save and protect the caves in a tenacious way. Even though Dunhuang frescoes were widely known to the nation because of the famous painter Zhang Daqian's

copying, as a matter of fact, Li Dinglong was the first person who has produced a copy of Dunhuang frescoes. The brilliant lustre which Dunhuang frescoes demonstrated shocked Li Dinglong to a great extent. He realized that Dunhuang frescoes were suffering serious damage in the process of copying Dunhuang frescoes, and appealed and petitioned the national government to protect Dunhuang cultural relics from being damaged any longer.

Mr. Chang Shuhong is the founder of Dunhuang Studies. Having achieved great success during the period of his stay in France, Mr. Chang came across a copy of Burghardt's Dunhuang Atlas when he went to an old bookstore in 1935, and finally realized how brilliant Dunhuang meant to the world. It was not until then that he returned to the homeland and moved his whole family to Dunhuang, where they stayed for fifty years. Having got recommended by Mr. Chang, the national government set up the Dunhuang Art Institute and started to recruit staff. Owing to tight funding and a difficult environment they were staying in, Mr. Chang and the staff of the Institute lit oil lamps, lived in stables and slept on adobe kang, which open a new chapter in the strengthening of research and protection of Dunhuang. In 1950, the Dunhuang Art Institute was established and Mr. Chang Shuhong, the "Guardian of Dunhuang", acted in the capacity of the directorship, dedicating his life to Dunhuang. The second director of the Dunhuang Academy, Duan Wenjie, known as the "Senior Monk of Mogao", spent nearly a decade on researching, organizing and copying a painting. In the year of 1962, Fan Jinshi commenced in her internship at Dunhuang, and her fate with Dunhuang has been linked since then. In order to safeguard Dunhuang and pass on Dunhuang culture in an intact manner, she promoted the promulgation and implementation of the *Gansu Dunhuang Mogao Caves Protection Regulations* by the Standing Committee of the Gansu Provincial People's Representative. What's more, she also actively engaged in international cooperation by way of inviting the Getty Conservation Institute of the United States to cooperate in completing the digitization of Dunhuang frescoes.

Not only is there the Silk Road spirit of cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, and mutual learning accumulated along the ancient Silk Road, but also the valuable spiritual wealth that Chang Shuhong, Duan Wenjie, Fan Jinshi, and countless Mogao Caves people have worked hard and willingly contributed to protect and promote Dunhuang culture in the Mogao Caves, all of which have profound educational significance. Cultural heritage is an important carrier of the country's excellent traditional culture and has been highly valued by the country in recent years. The promotion of education has also become one of the important ways, especially in basic education, to cultivate students' correct traditional cultural views from an early age. The story of "Mo Gaoren" guarding Dunhuang can also serve as a model for the integration of aesthetic education and moral education, emphasizing the importance of moral education in the discipline [6].

Dunhuang art has a long history and rich content. It is difficult to integrate its materials into primary school art education. Teachers need to enhance their professional and cultural knowledge, understand Dunhuang art at a deeper level, borrow other disciplines, expand curriculum forms, and mobilize students' enthusiasm to further impart its outstanding essence to students. In the teaching process, teachers can introduce Dunhuang art works from various learning fields, forming a more comprehensive and systematic subject knowledge system. By using historical timelines, students can have a clearer understanding of the development of Dunhuang art and also experience the formation of the Dunhuang spirit.

7. Conclusion

Due to the fact that primary and secondary schools are the backbone of education, teachers should make full use of the resources of Dunhuang art for the purpose of guiding students to appreciate and learn from multiple perspectives in modern elementary art education. The meaning of Dunhuang art in art education is not only the inheritance of art techniques and aesthetics, but also the significance of the inheritance of the spirit of Dunhuang. Therefore, strengthening the integration of Dunhuang art into the campus, enabling students to love cultural heritage in their studies, strengthening their cultural confidence, and emphasizing inheritance and innovation. From the perspective of Dunhuang's open and diverse art culture, Dunhuang's charm is able to be perceived in order to improve students' sense of cultural responsibility and implement the teaching philosophy of educating people through beauty in genuine senses.

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