

Introduction

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The Buddhist Art Forum, held in April 2012, was motivated by several factors: admiration for Buddhist art in its many and varied manifestations; concern about how much of this art is being damaged or lost; and a sense that its study, preservation and even presentation often involves peculiar difficulties beyond those normally encountered when dealing with other types of art. This sense was fuelled by the organisers' direct engagement in the study and conservation of Buddhist art *in situ*, witnessing the difficulties at first hand and the variety of strongly held attitudes by those involved. Hence the desire to bring together at the Forum as many and varied participants as possible, not in the hubristic hope of finding a common way forward, but rather to enable a dialogue among the differing perspectives and to highlight the hugely complex issues involved.

The result will be evident in this volume, where an extraordinary range of viewpoints is represented: from a monk in Nepal to a collector in New York, from an art historian in California to a conservation administrator in Bhutan. Although it was not possible in a single four-day conference to cover Buddhist art of all regions – Japan and much of Southeast Asia are regrettably absent – most periods and types of art are considered, from the earliest Indian stupas to contemporary Himalayan thangkas, while the influence of Buddhism on modern and contemporary western art is also explored. Nor are the papers confined solely to what might be considered 'art' from a western perspective: several of the papers explore the significance of natural landscape in Buddhist and post-Buddhist contexts, including communist North Korea. Interaction with Buddhist devotional objects is addressed, from ritual face-washing and teeth-cleaning of a Buddha image in Burma to the involvement of former prisoners and homeless veterans in an exhibition in the USA. Discussion of conservation issues ranges from grappling with fundamental maintenance at remote temples in Ladakh to meticulous work on a single brass sculpture at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Occasionally, the perspectives could not be more starkly different: compare, for example, the artist Antony Gormley's view of the destruction of the Bamiyan sculpture as, in a sense, fulfilling their original intention, with the conservator Yoko Taniguchi's meticulous work in trying to preserve thousands of wall painting fragments at the site. Not surprisingly perhaps, given their willingness to participate in the Forum, none of the contributors disputed the notion of 'Buddhist art' as such, at

least from the perspective that however different it may be – from a Gandharan sculpture to a Tibetan thangka – it is all informed by the same religion. In this sense, it is no different from the art of other religions – no one would dispute that the Lindisfarne Gospels and the Sistine Chapel ceiling are both products of Christian art, though they have little else in common.

Several contributors, however, note that the Buddhist art which they are considering was not produced as 'art', but rather to perform a particular function. There are differing perspectives on what this function was (or is): Peter Skilling emphasises the aspects of merit and reward – indeed, that 'Buddhist art is driven by an ideology of reward', while Matthieu Ricard, by contrast, emphasises Buddhist imagery and rituals, including sacred dance, as a means of achieving 'genuine and lasting happiness' through the liberation of the mind from 'mental poisons' and 'obscuring passions'. Other authors discuss the political and even nationalist use of Buddhist imagery: Kyaw and Crosby cite the use of images as expressions of Burmese nationalism, and Francesca Tarocco the use of photography by Buddhists as resistance to iconoclasm in early twentieth-century China. Marsha Haufler analyses the ways in which Buddhist temples are now used in North Korea as, among other things, 'highly politicised showplaces of religious freedom'. But none of these functions, of course, means that the work created is not art. Function is irrelevant in terms of whether an object was or is also perceived as art. No one looking at some of the plates in this volume – for example, of the Gandharan and Mathura sculptures discussed by Juhyung Rhi – can doubt that these are works of art of the highest order. Once again, comparison can be made with the art of other religions: most medieval art was not produced as 'art for art's sake', but rather to serve a devotional function, but no one would quibble as to whether Chartres Cathedral or the *Très Riches Heures* are great works of art.

We happen to know the names of the illuminators of the *Très Riches Heures*, but most medieval art was created anonymously by those who might be described as 'artisans' rather than 'artists' in the modern sense. The same point is made or implied in several papers in the present volume – that Buddhist art was created by 'craftsmen', with the implication that we should not regard it as 'art' as such, or at least should be very hesitant in doing so. Far more research needs to be undertaken on the status and attitudes of the creators of Buddhist art, in



Figure 1 Kizil, Cave 207 (Cave of the Painters). ca. 500. One of several portraits of wall painters in this cave, all wearing dress swords, holding paint pots and brushes, and one identified by an inscription. After Le Coq 1926: plate 36.

different periods and regions, but there can be little doubt that frequently they were professionals, often of supreme competence. Rare early portraits of painters survive in the ca. 500 CE 'Cave of the Painters' (Cave 207) at Kizil (Figure 1).¹ Brush and paint pot in hand, these figures, with sword at belt, are almost as elegantly dressed as the 'Tocharian Princes' depicted in the Cave of the Sixteen Sword-Bearers (Cave 8) at Kizil. Clearly, these professional painters did not perceive

themselves as humble craftsmen. Creation of many of the works of art discussed and illustrated in this volume would have depended on such a high level of training and expertise that the notion of a mere 'craftsman' is clearly inappropriate.

Of course, there are different categories of artistic production. In Melissa Kerin's paper, 'low' and 'high' art are regarded as outdated western concepts, and she emphasises the significance of 'material routinely discredited as marginalia'.

Francesca Tarocco similarly discusses the importance of photography for Buddhists in early twentieth-century China, placing this in the context of a willingness 'to embrace the technologies of mass-mediated modernity', while also observing that Chinese Buddhists had 'used for centuries seals and wooden printing blocks for the purpose of creating multiple copies of images and texts'. Claudine Bautze-Picron demonstrates the iconographical importance of 'ornament' in Burmese wall paintings, showing how it is not distributed at random, but rather 'how the various themes relate to each other, and how the location which they occupy within the temple may enhance its significance as a sacred space'; she describes the themes as forming a 'coherent whole – like sentences in a text'. Such new research on art that has previously been considered 'marginal' is an exciting development in the study of Buddhist art, though, ironically perhaps, it parallels the explosion of interest in exactly the same sort of material in the field of western art history, such as the images in the margins of Gothic manuscripts, or cheap mass-produced prints in the early modern period (see, e.g. Camille 1992; Jones 2010).

The productive exploration of ritual use and 'audience' evident in many papers in the present volume likewise reflects similar concerns in western art history, in which style is almost no longer studied. Indeed, the only paper in the present volume that engages in detailed stylistic analysis is John Clarke's on a fifteenth-century image of the Mahasiddha Virupa recently acquired by the Victoria and Albert Museum. As Robert Sharf observes, in discussing previous scholarship on cave sites such as Kizil and Mogao, much has been 'preoccupied with untangling the stylistic genealogies of the caves – the complex lines of architectural and artistic influence that link together these far-flung ruins. The task is daunting: our analysis of stylistic influence will depend, in part, on how these caves are dated, yet in many cases the only clues to dating come from stylistic analysis, a limitation that sometimes results in rather tenuous, if not circular, argument.' Yet, with the exception of rare scientific evidence, such as the carbon-14 dating of straw fibres from the earthen renders at Bamiyan (Taniguchi), and to some extent analysis of iconographical developments of the type undertaken by Juhyung Rhi, how else can works of art be dated so as to provide the chronological framework on which all other study depends? Written evidence is rarely available; as Dorjee Tshering observes of Bhutan, 'The patrons (supporters) and artists in our tradition neither sign nor keep records of any information on their works, which are believed to be merit-making in nature'.

Yet there remains another valuable tool: systematic observation and recording of objects to reconstruct their physical history. While the resulting data may be circumstantial – for example, one painting overlying another or a chamber clearly inserted within an existing structure – it nonetheless provides a sequential framework within which scientific data and documentary information can be inserted to aid interpretation of the sequence. This is the equivalent, for objects, of standing building archaeology.

Differences in quality have certainly been recognised in the Buddhist world, whether implicitly or explicitly, often in ways reminiscent of the western Middle Ages: for example, an emphasis on the richness of the materials employed. Different

strains or types of Buddhist art were also recognised. Patricia Berger discusses the sophisticated 'art-historical' approach of the Qing court in eighteenth-century China, where incoming gifts were labelled with tags documenting the 'date of the gift, the giver and identity of the deity in four languages'. As Berger recounts, the labels often incorporate information on the 'material composition of the image and details of where and when it was made'. No fewer than seven different kinds of 'bell metal' were recognised in this sophisticated cataloguing system, which as Berger explains was 'art-historical in its intention, in that it took into account both geographic and historical sources and thus recognised that the formal properties of Buddhist images were determined by the time and place of their creation and by the lineage of artisanship that produced them'.

Such analysis is of course central to a number of papers in this volume. Rhi, Skilling and Skorupski all refer to the development in India from aniconic to iconic imagery, and Rhi and Skorupski analyse the evolution of representing the Buddha in the art of Gandhara and Mathura. Skorupski refers to Hellenistic influence on Gandharan art to the extent that many aspects of its representations of the Buddha are 'Greek': 'His body is enveloped in a lavish cloak, which markedly resembles the himation or garment of the ancient Greeks, or the toga of the ancient Romans. His hair ... is reminiscent of the hairstyle of Greek gods.' Other authors refer to the adaptation of non-Buddhist imagery for Buddhist purposes; for example, Kerin argues that a painting used in a Tibetan shrine at Nako is a fourteenth-century Bonpo object that was 'repurposed' for a Buddhist context. Indeed, more than one author speculates that aspects of Buddhist belief and ritual – for instance, in terms of landscape pilgrimage – derive from prehistory, though that is difficult if not impossible to prove; as Matthew Kapstein comments wryly: 'we cannot directly document prehistory, and the history that we can document speaks of, well, history'.

Clearly, many of the same impulses, anxieties and taboos are common across cultures and religions. The offering of coins and precious objects to lakes and other landscape features, documented by Richard Blurton in Bangajang in the Himalayas, is reminiscent, for instance, of the swords thrown into rivers or lakes in the European Bronze Age, presumably similarly for a ritual purpose.² Blurton describes a particular group of rocks known as the 'vulva of the goddess', which 'have an approximately similar shape to female genitals, and women hoping for children bow down before them and place their heads between the projecting arms of the rocks imagined as the divine vulva'.³ Is this so different from the use of a fourth-century Roman cameo at the monastery of St Albans in the Middle Ages, which was laid between the breasts of an expectant mother 'with an invocation of St Alban, and then little by little slithered down to the *occiduum corporis partem*, by which process delivery was assured, since the infant awaiting birth fled away from the approaching stone' (Henderson 1972: 112–13). An underlying anxiety about women, evident in many aspects of Buddhism, is expressed in their exclusion from ceremonies such as the daily face-washing of the Buddha image in the Mahāmuni temple in Mandalay, as described by Kyaw and Crosby, where women are confined to the associated

ritual that takes place outside the chamber. It may be noted in passing that the exclusion of women from the holiest parts of religious sites has serious implications for their conservation, since many if not most conservators are women. Exactly the same applies in the Orthodox Christian world, where women are excluded from the sanctuary of churches for much the same reasons.

If Buddhist art is valuable as art, and shows many connections and similarities with non-Buddhist art, including the expression of fundamental human anxieties and instincts, it follows that it is part of the common heritage of mankind, and therefore deserves to be preserved for the common benefit of mankind. This is explicitly recognised in the observation by the present Dalai Lama in his Foreword to the book on Alice Kandell's collection, quoted in her paper: 'Tibetan civilisation forms a distinct part of the world's precious common heritage. Humanity would be poorer if it were to be lost.' The varied values of Buddhist art, which are not exclusive to Buddhism, are noted by several authors in this volume. Indeed, the site of Dunhuang, discussed in several of the papers, is the only World Heritage Site that has been recognised by UNESCO as fulfilling all six of the criteria for inclusion on the World Heritage List.⁴ These include: representing 'a masterpiece of human creative genius'; 'exhibiting an important interchange of human values'; bearing 'a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization'; and being 'directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance'. Since the Athens Charter of 1931, such values, together with conservation principles, have been codified in numerous international and national documents. In 1964, the Venice Charter, in setting forth international standards of conservation, stated that 'The intention of conserving and restoring monuments is to safeguard them no less as works of art than as historical evidence' (Venice Charter 1964: §3), while the Nara Document on Authenticity (1994) emphasises that:

4. In a world that is increasingly subject to the forces of globalization and homogenization, and in a world in which the search for cultural identity is sometimes pursued through aggressive nationalism and the suppression of the cultures of minorities, the essential contribution made by the consideration of authenticity in conservation practice is to clarify and illuminate the collective memory of humanity.

5. The diversity of cultures and heritage in our world is an irreplaceable source of spiritual and intellectual richness for all humankind. The protection and enhancement of cultural and heritage diversity in our world should be actively promoted as an essential aspect of human development (Nara 1994: §§ 4 and 5).

Of particular relevance to the issues discussed in the present volume are the *China Principles*, guidelines for the conservation and management of sites in China such as Dunhuang, and discussed by Wong, Demas and Agnew. They note that a fundamental precept of the *China Principles* is 'the conviction

that heritage sites have values that can be identified and stated, and that the aim of conservation is to preserve these values'. They discuss how resolving 'differences between historical and contemporary values is not always possible', but how 'resolution begins with an understanding of how values evolve over time, why they matter and to whom', and conclude that 'it is a rare situation where multiple values cannot be respected and revealed'. Dorjee Tshering, Director General of the Department of Culture of the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs of Bhutan, referring to the thousands of temples, *dzongs* and other Buddhist monuments in the country, states how each 'of these sites of great cultural, artistic or historical significance demands special attention from the government and central exchequer', and concludes that 'conservation guidelines, based on international standards of conservation but incorporating local Buddhist beliefs and skills, need to be developed urgently'. Recognition of the universal values of Buddhist sites, as well as the need for international conservation expertise, undoubtedly explains some of the extraordinary collaborations described in this volume: Japanese, German and Italian as well as Afghan at Bamiyan; Bhutan and the UK in research and in conservation work at Tamzhing; and the USA, UK, Japan and Australia with the Dunhuang Academy at the Mogao Grottoes.

But what preservation strategy is appropriate, or does it differ according to context or circumstance? Alexander von Rospatt, in his paper on the most sacred shrine of the Newar Buddhist tradition in the Kathmandu valley, rejects the notion that the 'contemporary – in its original inspiration western – tradition of conservation' is a 'naturally-given, self-evident way of addressing decay', regarding it merely as 'a particular tradition with its own history and agenda'. In his discussion of early ritual texts, he describes for example how it is believed that deities will leave an icon or shrine when it is no longer suitable, and that impaired objects are potentially harmful sources of ill fortune. He also discusses, however, how pragmatic considerations may lead to strategies of repair rather than outright renewal as required by the texts. Dorjee Tshering, discussing contemporary beliefs in Bhutan, writes that sacred paintings and statues are considered to be 'live objects', and that it is considered 'sinful and unacceptable' to leave the face of a Buddha incomplete. On the other hand, in his discussion of restoration practices in the Himalayas that are based on the 'standard excuse' that damaged sculptures and paintings cannot be ritually used, Christian Luczanits comments dryly that 'I have heard this explanation much more frequently from western conservators and western Buddhists than from local representatives, whether religious or secular.' Indeed, Luczanits demonstrates how this belief is contradicted by the fact that the temples undergoing restoration have been used ritually beforehand. A similar point is made by the other paper addressing conservation issues in Ladakh, which observes that twelfth-century wall paintings in temples that are still ritually used 'bear few traces of historic repairs or repainting which would testify to a strong religious tradition of renewal and restoration' (Martin de Fonjaudran *et al.*). Similar observations can be made in two very different contexts at Nako in Himachal Pradesh: the only significant restoration is of the central figure of the twelfth-century Manjushri mandala in the Lotsawa Lhakang undertaken before 1933 (Bogin 2005:



Figure 2 Dunhuang, Mogao Grottoes, Cave 435. Northern Wei. View of the southern wall with a principal Buddha of the original scheme severely damaged by the later insertion of a side chapel in the sixth century. Close inspection of the surviving original Buddha indicated that it had never been covered over but had always been visible in its damaged state. Photograph: Courtauld Institute and Dunhuang Academy 2010.

204); while in her discussion of a contemporary shrine at Nako, Melissa Kerin comments that many of the offerings are 'darkened by age', and that the paintings dating from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century 'though at times aged and sooty, are the very materials used to express one's devotion'. If the face of the Buddha cannot be left incomplete, how can one explain the state of a principal image in Cave 435 at Dunhuang, mutilated by the insertion of a side chapel in the sixth century, but never later restored (Figure 2)?

From a specifically Buddhist point of view, there may be particular reasons for preserving images or other objects through conservation, rather than by repair or renewal. Just as creating a work of art brings merit, Dorjee Tshering emphasises that conserving, restoring or caring for an aged object or site are considered 'acts of equal merit'. Both Matthieu Ricard and Melissa Kerin refer to the spiritual value of objects associated with great masters or beings, and sometimes bearing their hand or footprint, while Ricard emphasises that when 'thangkas are painted by the great masters they acquire, independently of their artistic quality, a great spiritual value'. A reason for the conservation programme currently being undertaken on the early sixteenth-century wall paintings of Tamzhing monastery in Bhutan, as discussed in the paper by Lisa Shekede and Stephen Rickerby, is that they are directly associated with the great Nyingma treasure-finder Pema Lingpa. No one would countenance threatening the authenticity or integrity of these paintings that are great spiritual relics as well as works of art.

Christian Luczanits and other authors demonstrate how modern restoration, as opposed to conservation, can sometimes result in grotesque falsification of the original paintings or sculptures. Observing that recent restoration work sometimes displays 'an astonishing absence of basic knowledge of Buddhist iconography', he demonstrates in detail how the wall paintings of the Maitreya Temple at Lo Manthang in Mustang have been falsified by the repainting of secondary deities around the mandalas so that they have become 'practically illegible' by the alteration of the principal Buddha image within a mandala so that it is now performing the wrong gesture, and even by the rewriting of inscriptions. He laments that such restorations have been undertaken 'without prior understanding of the original intention and meaning of these works of art'. Significantly, Luczanits observes that foreign scholars may now have a better understanding of such matters than local monks: 'the older a monument is, the greater is the likelihood that the local interpretation is off the mark'. A rather similar point is made by Richard Blurton in his account of the pilgrimage undertaken in the landscape of Bangajang in Arunachal Pradesh: 'Today, any non-mythical history of Bangajang is almost completely unknown to pilgrims, and to the monks who guide them through the sacred landscape'. Such local ignorance of history and significance will come as no surprise to anyone who has been guided around a western monument or site, but it has obvious implications for preservation and authenticity.

Beyond such dangers presented by western or local ignorance, what other threats exist to Buddhist works of art? Several authors refer to the exceptional natural hazards to which some Buddhist sites, especially in the Himalayas, are subject: catastrophes such as earthquake and flooding. Warfare

and religious iconoclasm have caused enormous damage, most notoriously in recent years in the destruction of the monumental Buddhas of Bamiyan, blown up by the Taliban in 2001. Yoko Taniguchi also discusses the bullet holes that scar the surviving wall paintings there. Bullet holes – though from a rather different source – reappear in Marsha Haufler's paper on the Pohyön Temple at Mount Myohyang; her account of the enormous destruction wrought by the Korean War makes sad reading, and one can sympathise with the bitterness expressed over the 'imperialists' indiscriminate bombing' that she quotes. Other causes of damage and destruction, though, are more avoidable. Fire is a constant hazard to Buddhist temples and other buildings constructed substantially of wooden elements; Haufler refers to the disastrous fire at the Pohyön Temple in the 1760s, and Shekede and Rickerby to the razing of the Wangduephrodang Dzong in Bhutan as recently as 2012. The latter fire was attributed to electrical faults, but the dangers posed by the ritual use of butter lamps in the region are also obvious and highlighted by Shekede and Rickerby.⁵ Less dramatic but perhaps overall the most serious problem, highlighted in several papers, is the lack of appropriate building maintenance, leading to rainwater damage to wall paintings and even to structural failure of the buildings themselves (Luczanits; Martin de Fonjaudran *et al.*; Shekede and Rickerby; Tshering). An important factor in such inadequate maintenance is the use of inappropriate modern materials, such as the plastic sheeting in the roofs of Himalayan buildings deplored by Luczanits, rather than traditional techniques that are now so often either lost or undervalued. Again, this is a universal problem, with traditional crafts disappearing worldwide.

The intrusion of modern materials, sometimes in inappropriate and rather surprising ways, is demonstrated in several of the papers. For example, the use of prayer flags of synthetic cloth with nylon strings by the pilgrims in Bangajang discussed by Richard Blurton, and their lake offerings of *kathak* of manmade fibre that do not rot, so that 'the surface of the water today appears from afar as if it has a whitish bloom'. As several authors demonstrate, the common view that traditional methods and materials are still employed in Buddhist art is at least partly erroneous. Shekede and Rickerby include a fascinating account of the effect of imported mass-produced goods from British India on the nature and quality of painting in Bhutan from the 1830s onward: cloth replaced earthen plaster as the normal support for paintings in temples (meaning that for the first time most 'wall paintings' could be executed *ex situ*), and 'with the increasing availability of synthetic pigments in a range of bold new colours, the use of traditional paint materials and practices also dwindled', leading to a 'considerably diminished' quality of workmanship which of course continues to this day. By contrast, scientific examination is now revealing for the first time the astonishing sophistication of paintings and other works of art from earlier periods. Scarcely recognised until recently, the widespread use of organic colorants in glazes or selective coatings, to modulate tonalities and to provide subtle translucent effects, is now understood as one of the most fundamental and widespread practices in Buddhist wall paintings, as emphasised here in the papers on Bamiyan, Dunhuang, Ladakh and Bhutan (Taniguchi; Wong *et al.*; Martin de Fonjaudran *et al.*; Shekede

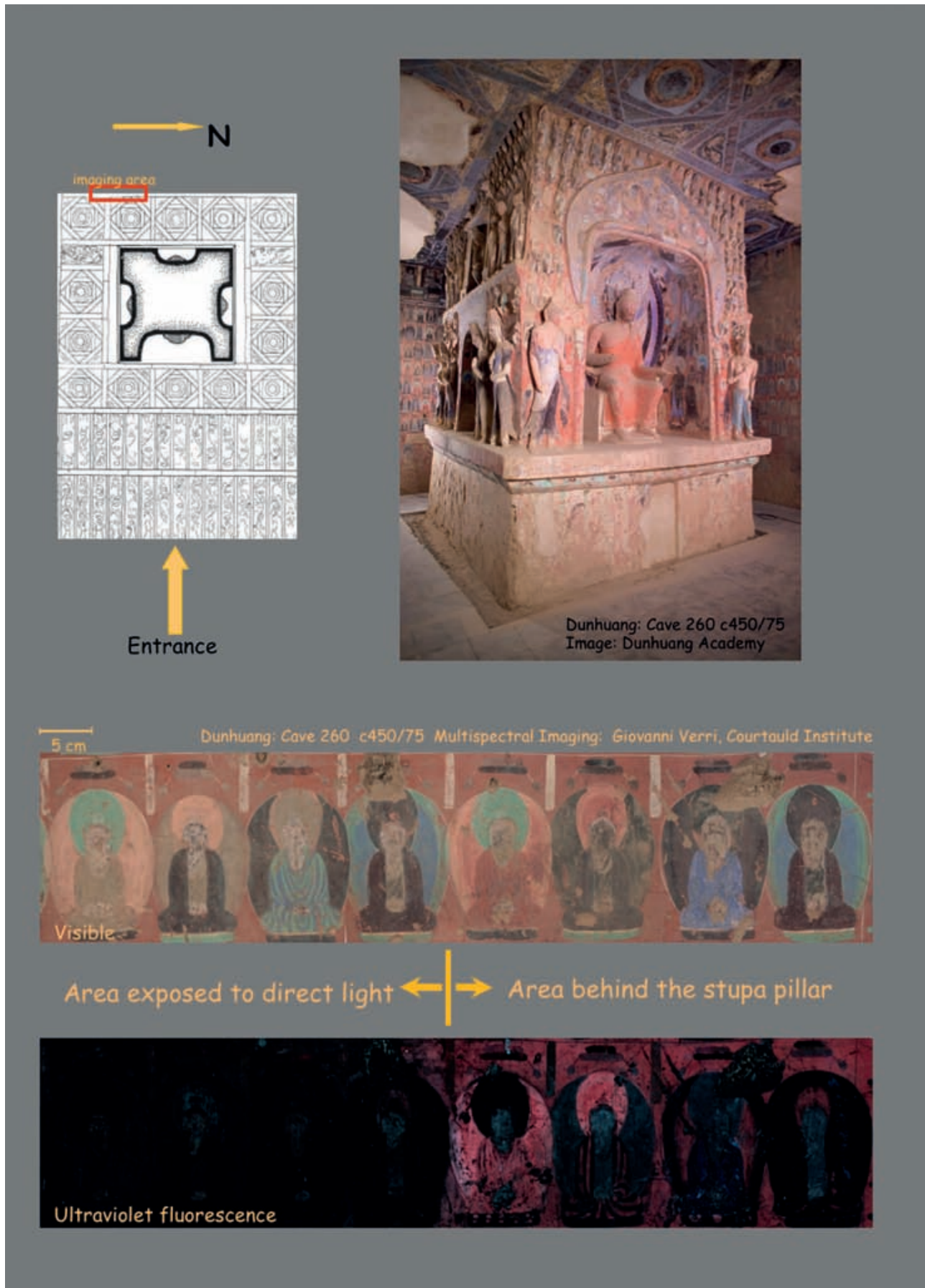


Figure 3 Dunhuang, Mogao Grottoes, Cave 260. ca. 450-75. Multispectral investigation of the condition of the painting showed that there was significant deterioration of the painted areas exposed to light compared to those 'shaded' by the stupa pillar. The resulting photodeterioration of the organic colorants used for the final glazing of the painting is clearly visible in ultraviolet-induced fluorescence imaging. Image: Courtauld Institute and Dunhuang Academy 2005.

and Rickerby). In terms of the inappropriateness of modern materials, Martin de Fonjaudran and her co-authors cite the striking case of the monks responsible for the care of the wall paintings at Mangyu and Alchi in Ladakh, who demanded that missing elements of the paintings should *not* be repainted, chiefly on the grounds that 'the materials used for repainting are often not suitable'.

Scientific examination is not only providing much new information on how Buddhist art was created, and how it was originally intended to appear, but also has the potential to throw significant light on wider historical and art-historical issues. Taniguchi discusses the recent remarkable discovery of the use of oil as a medium in the mid-seventh-century wall painting at Bamiyan – 'the earliest known example in the world' – though in a broader context providing important new evidence for the cultural interchange between Europe and Asia already discussed in this context by historians and art historians. Much light could doubtless be thrown – if the pun can be excused – on how the painted caves at Dunhuang and elsewhere were used, and whether they were intended to be closed and left in the dark, as Robert Sharf argues in his paper. The evidence for fading (Figure 3), partial and total historic repainting, and the ritual use of candles and incense in the caves, deserve with other such factors to be systematically studied and presented in order to address such important questions. Many exciting opportunities beckon for future collaboration between conservators and art historians, to deepen our understanding of the development of Buddhist art and of Buddhism itself.

But an unmistakable note of alarm is sounded by most of the conservation papers in this volume about what is now happening, while, as Susan Whitfield observes sombrely, the 'many threats to Buddhist art worldwide are not going to diminish'. The very sub-headings in Christian Luczanits' paper – 'Fragile foundations', 'Minding gaps', 'Black curtains' – are like a tocsin bell sounding the alarm. Some of these concerns relate to inappropriate cleaning and repainting of works of art whose sophistication and fragility is only now, ironically, being revealed by scientific analysis; for example, Shekede and Rickerby describe the organic layers referred to above as 'at risk of damage or loss from cleaning interventions' since they are 'often the most fragile and least well understood aspect of technology'. Associated with such threats is the inadequate training of many conservators or even, astonishingly, the use of untrained western conservation volunteers. And behind much of this is western funding, typically well intentioned, but often having disastrous consequences.

A further driving force for inappropriate conservation is the western art market. Luczanits relates that it is not uncommon for entire areas of thangkhas to be 'invented almost at random' to render them more saleable, and thus their iconography may be disastrously falsified. As he observes, the restoration expectations generated by the art market may even have a knock-on effect on wall paintings still *in situ* in functioning temples: 'it is remarkable that their repainting through western conservation projects has increased parallel to that of portable objects'.

Such damage and falsification are why so many contributors to this volume stress the need for minimum intervention

as a conservation approach and for detailed and accurate documentation. Minimum intervention, which aims to preserve rather than restore, to do 'as much as necessary but as little as possible' (Burra Charter 1999: §3.1), is an ideal to which many, if not most, conservators now pay lip service, though as Luczanits observes: 'this type of intervention is by far the least common in the case of the Buddhist art of the Himalayas on which I have conducted research'. As well as damaging the integrity and authenticity of works of art, most types of restoration are not reversible, and this has consequences not only for the present but for the future. As Wong, Demas and Agnew observe: 'What might be acceptable today in terms of a full restoration, including extensive repainting and loss of original fabric, will very possibly be viewed with regret and disappointment tomorrow'. Hence the emphasis in a number of the papers on preventive measures, addressing the underlying causes of deterioration, rather than on intrusive and potentially damaging interventions directly on the works of art themselves. Nowhere is this exemplified better than at Dunhuang, where such measures developed from the 1980s onward by the Dunhuang Academy and the Getty Conservation Institute include large-scale environmental measures such as wind fencing and sand-stabilising, and where an early warning system of environmental risks is currently being developed (Wang Xudong).

The critical importance of documentation is stressed by Susan Whitfield and other contributors, as well as by national and international conservation documents. Recognition of the need for accurate documentation is nothing new, as Patricia Berger's discussion of the scrupulous cataloguing and labelling of Buddhist art at the Qing court in eighteenth-century China makes plain. Increasing restoration activity now makes documentation yet more urgent; some works that have been inaccurately restored can now only be properly understood through pre-restoration documentation, as Luczanits observes in the case of monuments in Mustang. Even more striking are the cases where major works of art have been lost in recent years, such as the splendid thirteenth-century paintings in the goenkhang at Changankha Lhakang in Bhutan. As discussed by Lisa Shekede and Stephen Rickerby, these paintings – the earliest known wall paintings in Bhutan – were replaced in the 1990s, and are now known chiefly from a few photographs fortunately taken beforehand.⁶ Such issues lead to questions discussed by Susan Whitfield: who is responsible for producing the necessary documentation, what sort of training is necessary, how should the documentation be funded, and how should it be accessible through archives and other means? Some of these issues can be considered in relation to the exceptionally high standard of documentation recently undertaken by Shekede and Rickerby themselves of wall paintings in Bhutan: their 2012 report on the materials and techniques of such paintings, carried out on behalf of the Courtauld Institute and Bhutan's Department of Culture, runs to two volumes and 835 pages (Shekede and Rickerby 2012). Funded by an anonymous US donor, copies of the report have been provided to the relevant authorities for whom it was produced with the primary purpose of helping to 'develop strategies for the protection and conservation of Bhutan's wall painting heritage by improving understanding of their

physical nature and deterioration processes, and identifying the main risks to their preservation'. The authors were able to undertake all aspects of the documentation themselves since they had been trained to do so as part of their postgraduate education in conservation, but as successful professional conservators they are now too busy to publish more than selected aspects of the research. While their report is accessible to interested researchers, no further funding exists to publish it, so doubtless in such a case the future strategy must lie in making the research available online, though even that requires funding and personnel resources that are normally difficult to find.

Both Christian Luczanits and Susan Whitfield emphasise the importance of research archives, such as the Western Himalaya Archive in Vienna and the Huntington Archive of Buddhist and Asian Art at Ohio State University, though Whitfield's observation that 'the Huntingtons have probably expended as much time and effort in raising funds to ensure the long-term future of this archive as they did in creating it in the first place' will ring true to anyone in the academic world. Despite all their advantages in safely housing complex and varied material, hard-copy archives are no longer fashionable in the present digital age, and Whitfield's comments regarding the Huntington archive apply more generally: the 'move to digital has ensured the possibility of greater access, but also the need for considerable funds to transfer early analogue material into digital form, and continuing funding to preserve the preservation of the digital archive'. But beyond digitisation, expectations of the level of recording – now 3D and interactive – are soaring, creating their own new issues.

Perhaps even more serious than inadequate documentation is the lack of either strategies or funding to monitor and maintain objects once they have been conserved. Charlotte Martin de Fonjaudran and her colleagues highlight this virtually universal problem for conserving works of art *in situ*. Outside of institutions such as museums, essential follow-up is normally almost impossible to achieve. Even in the most expert and well-intentioned *in-situ* conservation projects funding is unlikely to be available for long-term post-conservation surveillance. Moreover, the conservators will have gone on to new projects. For the vast majority of works of art *in situ*, post-conservation monitoring remains a dream (Matteini 1991: 139). This is ironic since it is precisely those objects that are most at risk of future deterioration that remain the least protected. Only where a legally responsible body with the permanency, knowledge, skills and resources is directly involved, such as the Dunhuang Academy at Mogao, can such a strategy work successfully (Wang Xudong). Doubtless it should be a priority for national authorities to develop the best management strategies possible.

Local conservation training might appear to form part of the answer, but it is normally extremely difficult to achieve. The reasons are many: lack of an adequate educational base on which to build, lack of technical infrastructure for oversight, poor career prospects as well as intermittent funding and thus intermittent employment. Conservation is complex and requires the understanding of original materials and causes of deterioration in order to formulate appropriate interventions, including preventive and passive approaches, which are yet more demanding of knowledge and skill (Cather 2010). All



Figure 4 Dunhuang, Mogao Grottoes. Pressure from domestic tourism is especially pronounced at the site during the autumn Golden Week in China beginning on National Day (1 October). Special management arrangements are made and tourists face a long wait. Photograph: Dunhuang Academy, October 2013.

require scientific knowledge, and it is therefore no accident that most western conservation education is at postgraduate level. Every case in conservation is different, and nothing is more dangerous than short-term training that ignores this basic fact (Martin de Fonjaudran *et al.*; Shekede and Rickerby). Christian Luczanits refers to a lack of transparency in conservation – indeed a disturbing 'secrecy' in wall painting conservation – that is obviously undesirable if it exists merely for professional reasons. There is, however, one very good reason for a certain level of discretion, and that is to avoid disseminating treatment 'recipes', which then risk being used inappropriately for decades. Luczanits himself deplores the use of *tratteggio*, but this and other western 'reintegration' techniques, often ill-understood and poorly executed, have spread like a rash throughout Asia.

These are only some of the many pressing conservation issues. Tourism is another, with Dunhuang an extreme case, discussed in two of the papers (Wang Xudong; Wong *et al.*). Wang Xudong, in particular, discusses the measures employed at Dunhuang to cope with up to 18,000 visitors a day, with all the potential damage such visitors may cause, while also ensuring that the religious and other values of the site are preserved (Figures 4 and 5). Measures have included a 'Visitor Carrying Capacity' research project undertaken with the Getty Conservation Institute to determine safe levels of visitors to the caves, and currently the construction of a new Mogao Grottoes Visitor Center at some distance away from the site. The new centre will allow visitors to take 'full advantage of digital displays using multimedia techniques ... [that] can significantly reduce their time in the caves themselves', thus mitigating the pressure from tourism. Such measures are inevitable given the exponential rise in domestic tourism at Dunhuang, but would clearly be unsuitable for many other sites, especially functioning temples and monasteries.

Of course, there is another side to tourism: its enormous growth, due partly to increasing western interest in Buddhism and Buddhist art, can bring significant financial benefits

to those responsible for the care of the sites. Much recent restoration work has been driven by this. Western art historians, archaeologists and conservators are to some extent responsible by drawing attention to what they are trying to study and preserve. Such issues, and attendant dangers such as theft, are nothing new, even if they are now occurring on an alarming scale. Discussing the work of Aurel Stein and others in Central Asia around 1900, Susan Whitfield mentions that 'as soon as Stein and others uncovered sites and showed an interest in their artefacts, like the builders in Fellini's *Roma*, they instigated the process of destruction, most immediately by the treasure-seekers'. She discusses a disturbing case from the 1990s, when a western journalist and several others excavated and removed wall paintings and other artefacts from a site, without permission, and how the journalist's 'act of rediscovery and publication of his work again laid this site open to potential destruction, despite his declared intention to protect the site by not publishing the coordinates'. There is a similar issue here to maintaining secrecy over the location of rare orchids or nesting sites in the field of nature conservation, and indeed of not publishing 'recipes' that could lead to severe damage in the field of cultural heritage preservation.

Although less fraught with danger for the objects, similar issues arise over the display of Buddhist art, especially in western galleries and museums. How should the audience interact with it, and therefore how should it be displayed? Is there any one right way, especially given the enormous diversity of Buddhist art itself? Very different attitudes are evident in the present volume. The collector Alice Kandell discusses her generous gift of a complete Tibetan shrine of 220 objects to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, quoting how the 'terms of her gift stipulated that there be a long-term display of the objects within a liturgically appropriate and distinctly separate shrine room gallery', and how the collection is 'unique in its focus on presenting the art in the context of a working shrine'. By contrast, the approach described by Francesca Consagra, in her account of the *Reflections of the Buddha* exhibition held at the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts in St. Louis in 2011–12 could scarcely have been more different. Displayed in a building by the architect Tadao Ando characterised by 'simple geometrical forms with the use of simple materials', the exhibition 'evolved primarily from three driving forces: the desire to organise exhibitions that unify art and architecture; Ando's own references to Buddhist ideas in his buildings and writings; and the Minimalist predisposition for highly spatial experiences with art'. Consagra describes how the Buddhist works of art were 'primarily presented in a grid-like configuration within the galleries, which offered the visitor the ability to see each work from multiple viewpoints without obstruction', and that no wall texts or labels were used since these were regarded 'as distractions that motivate the visitor to intellectualise, judge, and categorise rather than allowing the visitor to engage fully with the art and the space'. Even in this exhibition however, with its 25 disparate works of art arranged in a sequence of austere spaces, there was engagement with active Buddhism, including a 'series of meditation classes led by clergy and laity from a variety of Buddhist sects', as well as opening and closing ceremonies.⁷ Probably the most notable example of such direct Buddhist engagement with an exhibition was

with *The Dragon's Gift: The Sacred Arts of Bhutan*, organised by the Honolulu Academy of Arts in cooperation with the Department of Culture of Bhutan and sponsored by the Robert H.N. Ho Family Foundation, which toured museums in the USA, Europe and Asia in 2008–10. Here, the objects were not only accompanied by Buddhist monks, who performed the 'necessary ritual observances', but a further important element of the exhibition was the performance of 'ancient ritual dances that have been preserved intact in Bhutan'⁸ and whose documentation during months of fieldwork had formed an integral part of presenting the exhibition.

Similar to the minimalist approach of the *Reflections of the Buddha* exhibition in the Ando building in St. Louis has been the response to Buddhism of many modern western artists. In her paper on the influence of Buddhism on American art, Alexandra Munroe refers to the 'modernist shift between the conception of art as an object of visual delight to an experiential activity that unfolds in time and space'. In discussing the 'pure abstraction' of Ad Reinhardt's black paintings of 1961–7, Munroe refers to Reinhardt's reverence for 'Buddhist sculptures, Tantric mandalas, and Chinese landscape paintings', and quotes his own declaration about his work as being 'a pure, abstract, non-objective, timeless, spaceless, changeless, relationless, disinterested painting'. Some of these adjectives would certainly apply to various types of Buddhist painting as perceived by Buddhist practitioners, but what could be more different, in some ways at least, than a Reinhardt black painting and a Himalayan mandala? Matthieu Ricard observes that some mandalas 'have 722 deities', and that the visualisations achieved through such images 'can be incredibly complex'. As a practising monk in the Himalayas, he describes how mandalas 'can be seen as meditation objects whose purpose is to gradually transform our way of perceiving the world until we discover its inner purity ... No detail of the mandala is there by chance. Each one has a precise symbolic meaning that the practitioner should bear in mind.' Clearly, this is a long way from a modern abstract painting, even if the underlying intentions may be compared.

Munroe describes how by the 1980s American artists' 'interests in multiplicity; ephemerality; art's relation to the everyday; the use of concept, language, and the artist's body as art, blurred conventional distinctions and gave rise to Happenings, performance art, conceptual art, and intermedia and interactive installations. In the process, art became about the act of attention – a state of mindfulness that could correctly assume a certain cultural fluency with Asian concepts of being and consciousness.' Many of the same interests are evident in the sculpture of Antony Gormley, who uses the same expression, 'mindfulness', in the title of his paper. Gormley describes 'how Buddhism – primarily the practice of meditation, but also the artefacts associated with the thought field of Buddhism – has influenced me'. He discusses his own interaction with Buddhist works such as the sculptures of the Longmen Grottoes, a site he describes as 'an object lesson in positive and negative space and the distinction between size and scale, constantly inviting you to sense your own body-mass in relation to relative scales'. As noted at the beginning of this Introduction, rather than being disturbed by the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas, Gormley regards it as 'ironic that the Taliban completed this



Figure 5 Dunhuang, Mogao Grottoes, Cave 251. Northern Wei. Buddhist devotional practice at the Mogao Grottoes has been increasing in recent years and, as seen here, many of the caves attract donations. Photograph: Courtauld Institute and Dunhuang Academy 2010.

work so beautifully', concluding that this 'site, in its evolution and destruction, becomes an instrument of realisation. The Taliban have completed a working meditational device.'

We thus return to the differing attitudes – indeed contradictions – evident in the present volume. Clearly, there is no one type of 'Buddhist art', any more than there is any one correct way of using or reacting to it. Nor will there ever be, since as many of the papers show, Buddhist art is constantly evolving: from aniconic to iconic imagery in early Indian sculpture, to a willingness to engage with photography and other modern media in the twentieth century (Skorupski; Rhi; Tarocco). Francesca Tarocco's discussion of how Buddhists in early twentieth-century China were inspired 'to embrace the technologies of mass-mediated modernity, from radio to the printing press, to photography' resonates with Melissa Kerin's account of the readiness to embrace mass-produced imagery in present-day Tibetan shrines. Kerin emphasises the use of 'photo-icons' – a phrase also used by Tarocco – in such shrines, as well as 'plastic flowers and pink festive ware', and in general the intermixing of 'modern mass-produced and pre-modern manually produced'. Kerin refers to the steward of a family shrine in Leh who 'was eager to explain that his collection of art objects housed within this family shrine was ... the result of religious practice, not aesthetic interest such as we see in the West'. Such observations lead Kerin to conclude that by 'bringing attention to objects other than those that traditionally are identified as constituting "Buddhist art", we begin to destabilise, in productive ways, the often reified canonical art-historical categories of "low" and "high" art, inherited from dated models of western art history'. Again, this leads us back to issues such as 'quality', discussed above. Is the perception that a Michelangelo sculpture is artistically superior to a contemporary woodcut an outmoded western concept, or that a Gupta sculpture of the type illustrated by Juhyung Rhi⁹ is a supreme work of art of universal value, whatever the intention and functions of these different works might be? If so, there would be serious implications for conservation since it would be more difficult to prioritise how scarce financial and other resources should be utilised. Debate on such matters will surely continue. Buddhist art, in its extraordinarily varied manifestations, is constantly evolving, and how it is perceived and attitudes to preserving it will also doubtless continue to do so.

Notes

1. At Kizil, descriptive names were given to the caves by the archaeologist explorer Albert Grünwedel who illustrates three other wall painters represented in the Cave of the Painters (Cave 207) (Grünwedel 1912: figs 334, 337 and 338).
2. Although later, King Arthur's insistence at his death that his sword Excaliber should be thrown into the lake is a well-known example recounted by Malory (2004: 687).

3. See Figure 17 in the paper by Blurton.
4. For the full list of criteria, see <http://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria>. Just one criterion can be sufficient for inclusion on the World Heritage List, as long as the site is 'of outstanding universal value'.
5. See Figure 2 in the paper by Shekede and Rickerby.
6. See Figure 13 in the paper by Shekede and Rickerby.
7. See Figures 13 and 14 in the paper by Consagra.
8. See the description of the exhibition on the Rubin Museum of Art website: <http://www.rmanyc.org/nav/exhibitions/view/116>.
9. See Figure 1 in the paper by Rhi.

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