

# The Artist's Tale

Dong Baode, 965

While common artists concentrate on the outline, Master Wu's strokes are split and scattered. While others try carefully to emulate the exact shape of the subject, Master Wu was above such vulgar techniques. In painting curves, absolutely straight lines, upright pillars or connecting roof beams, Master Wu did not make any use of a ruler or foot measure. He painted curly beards and long tufts of hair waving and fluttering from the temples of his subjects with such an abundance of strength that the hairs seem to be detaching themselves from the flesh. He must have been possessor of a great secret which no one understands now. He could start a picture eight foot high from either the arms or the legs and make a strange and marvellous subject which was so alive that it seemed to have blood circulating under the skin.

On the artist Wu Daozi, *Lidai minghua ji* (Record of Famous Painters through the Ages), AD 847

**D**ONG BAODE WAS the Manager of the local Painting Guild and a Master Painter, a member of the government Painting Academy in the town of Dunhuang. It was 965 and Dunhuang, although offering nominal allegiance to the new Song dynasty in China, had been ruled by the local Cao family since 920. Cao Yuanzhong, who called himself king, was the current ruler and Baode's patron.

In addition to the Painting Academy, Cao had established a government printing bureau. There Lan Yanmei was employed as an official woodblock printer. Like Baode, much of his work was commissioned by the king, and the two men often met in a local

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tea-house to discuss what they were doing over a game of double-sixes. Yanmei's work involved carving both text and illustrations, but he was neither a scribe nor a painter. When the king commissioned a printed prayer sheet with a picture of bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara at the top and a prayer beneath, a scribe wrote the text and an artist drew the picture on separate, thin sheets. Yanmei then pasted the paper ink-side down on a block of wood which had been cut and smoothed for the purpose. He often used local pearwood or jujube, both smooth and evenly textured, or, if he could get hold of it, wood from the Catalpa tree, although this had to be imported and was expensive. The ink was clearly visible through the paper and Yanmei deftly chiselled out the wood in the spaces between, leaving the characters standing proud. He then carved a separate block for the picture. Next, the two woodblocks were inked and coarse, locally made paper was laid on top and rubbed with a dry brush. The printed sheets were then distributed to local monasteries. The woodblock of the illustration was also later reused separately to make multiple images of the bodhisattva. This was not the first of Cao Yuanzhong's commissions. In 947, a year after he came to the throne, he had requested that prayers be printed to mark the Ghost Festival:

\* Printing

The disciple Cao Yuanzhong, Military Governor of the Returning to Allegiance Army District, Inspector for Guazhou and Shazhou, Commissioner for the distribution of military land allotments in the sphere of his jurisdiction and for the suppression of the Tibetan tribes, specially promoted Grand Preceptor, and Inaugural Marquis of Qiaojun, ordered this block to be carved for printing so that the City of God may enjoy peace and prosperity, that the whole prefecture may be tranquil, that the roads east and westwards may remain open, that evil-doers north and south may be reformed, that diseases may disappear, that the sound of the war gong may no longer be heard, that pleasure may attend both eye and ear, and that all may be steeped in happiness and good fortune.

Copies of this and the printed prayer were among Aurel Stein's purchases of documents and paintings when he visited Dunhuang in 1907.

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King Cao and his wife Lady Zhai were assiduous patrons of Buddhism throughout their reign. In the years after the commissioning of the prayer, they donated numerous items to local monasteries, all of which were carefully recorded. For New Year 984, another traditional time of celebration and giving, Lady Zhai presented a sutra wrapper 'embroidered in a great variety of colours'. Sutra scrolls were stored in bundles of ten on the library shelves inside rectangular wrappers faced with cloth and often lined with old paper. A catalogue tag was inscribed with details of the contents of the bundle, for example, 'rolls 1-10 of *The Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*'. The tag was attached to the edge of the wrapper so that it was visible once the bundle was placed on a shelf.

*paper types* / Among the items donated by her husband during this period was a roll of fine paper that had been made in workshops in China with paper pulp from hemp (*Cannabis sativa*) and the bark of the paper mulberry tree (*Broussonetia papyrifera*). The paper was produced in a mould, a rectangular wooden frame with narrow bars across which was laid a screen made of fine bamboo strips, held in place by hemp or horsehair threads. Paper pulp was poured in the mould and evenly distributed, and the resulting sheet was turned out to dry. By this time, in a further refinement, the paper makers were also placing a fine silk sheet on the screen to prevent the impression of lines from the bamboo screen on the finished paper. Once dry, the paper sheets were brushed with size and dyed with *huangbo*, a yellow pigment extracted from the bark of the Amur cork tree (*Phellodendron amurense*). The pigment had insecticidal and water-repellent properties. Such fine paper was used to make library copies of sutras but it had been rare in Dunhuang even before the Tibetans had occupied the city in 787, and printers and scribes generally had to make do with much rougher, locally made paper. They also rummaged through old stores of documents, mainly contracts and other administrative works dating from the Tibetan period, some of which were only written on one side and could be reused. Most were undyed. Scraps were given to the school teacher for his pupils' writing exercises.

*pigment* /

King Cao also commissioned paintings, both portable works on silk and murals on the walls of local cave temples. Many followed

the king's example, and professional painters such as Dong Baode were kept busy. Dong Baode had reason to be pleased with life. He had reached the top of his profession several years before and he now made a comfortable living. He had an official title which, although it was not especially exalted, still gave him additional status in the local community. He also held the honorary titles of 'Acting Adviser to the Heir Apparent' and 'Grand Master of Imperial Entertainments with Silver Seal and Blue Ribbon'. There must have been drawbacks to his job – dealing with officious bureaucrats and lazy workmen – but his was skilled and relatively well-paid work, and there was also plenty of it. There were more than fifteen monasteries and nunneries situated in and around Dunhuang and, most important of all, there were the cave temples some twelve miles south-east of the town, known as the Mogao caves.

There an east-facing cliff rises irregularly above a small stream to a height of over a hundred feet and extends in each direction for about a mile. Poplars and elms grow next to the stream, which carries little water except during the summer floods. Since the fourth century, monks and lay Buddhists travelling the Silk Road had excavated caves in several tiers along the cliff face first as meditation cells and later as places of worship, paying for elaborate murals and painted stucco statues to adorn them. Much of Baode's work consisted in renovating paintings in existing caves and in decorating newly commissioned caves.

Three years earlier, in 962, Baode had supervised the decoration of one such newly excavated cave sponsored by King Cao. The excavation itself had been carried out by unskilled labourers. A space was chosen at the foot of the cliff to erect scaffolding which was then built to the height of the proposed cave's roof. By the mid-tenth century most of the cliff had been used and hundreds of caves, linked by wooden walkways and steps, honeycombed its yellow rock. Often old caves were reworked, sometimes being extended or simply overpainted, and several additional cave sites had come into use around the town.

The conglomerate from which the cliff was formed was

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extremely friable and not difficult to excavate: only picks and shovels were needed. The workmen started at roof-level and worked into the cliff and downwards, the debris being taken away in baskets. The work was hot, dirty and tiring and the workmen were hampered by the wind which swept across the cliff face, bringing down sand from the slope above the rock. As part payment for their services they were fed in the monastery on the valley floor. Monastery officials visited every few days to survey the progress and decide on the eventual size of the cave. The king was their most important patron and they wanted to ensure that the work was well executed, and within budget.

Once the preliminary excavation work had been done, the roof and walls were chiselled out further by stonemasons, and the floor was tamped to make it flat and smooth. The cave consisted of a small antechamber, joined to the main chamber by a short passage. The uppermost walls of the main chamber sloped towards a coffered roof and in the centre of the chamber a wall of stone with a U-shaped platform in front was left standing.

Once the excavation was complete, a team of plasterers took over, covering the rock walls with a thick straw and clay stucco, overlaid with a fine slip. In the desert heat this did not take long to dry. The paintings were to be murals rather than frescos, painted on a dry surface. The labourers and stonemasons were paid off with grain and a meal and the plasterer additionally received three litres of hemp oil.

Various paintings had been commissioned by wealthy individuals to adorn the walls and ceiling: there were to be several on the main register of each wall, including various paradise scenes, events from the *Guanshiyin sutra*, and the story of the monk Śāriputra subjugating demons. This last was very popular at the time: there were similar depictions in other caves and Baode had only to look through his files to find guide sketches for the composition. Before starting work he spent a morning in the cave, measuring its dimensions and, in his head, laying out the various scenes. He then ordered his young apprentices to mark up the wall. To do so they dipped string in red powder, held it taut near the wall and then flicked it so that the powder transferred itself from the string to the wall, thus defining the limits of each hori-

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zontal register and of each main composition. The most important events of the story of Śāriputra occupied nine panels on the lower register of the south wall, while other scenes from the story were shown on the west wall.

The story tells of the chief minister of a kingdom in southern India whose 'moral purchase is as important as salt and pepper are for cooking', but who is not yet a Buddhist. He has several sons, the youngest of whom has yet to marry. In order to find his son a wife he dispatches a trusted servant with gold, bracelets of fine jade, bolts of silk brocade and gauze, and a hundred elephants. 'Even when the stars come out at night you must not rest . . . should you gratify my son's wishes a handsome reward awaits you.' A suitable girl, the daughter of the premier of another kingdom, is duly found and the chief minister goes to stay with the girl's family to discuss the marriage. Here he learns of Buddhism and, filled with a desire to know more, sets out to find Buddha guided by a light sent by Buddha himself: thereupon 'he suddenly awakens to a state of enlightenment'. Buddha designates a fellow countryman, the young monk Śāriputra, to be his guide and the two return to their kingdom to find a place where they can invite Buddha to preach. After some searching they locate a suitable park which they purchase, at great cost, from the crown prince. But the Six Masters of the heretical doctrines of the kingdom are not happy. In the words of the storyteller:

Filled with anger,  
They puffed up their cheeks, arched their eyebrows,  
Gnashed their teeth and bared their gums.  
They were extraordinarily irate.

They inform the king, and the chief minister is detained for interrogation. The king, hearing his chief minister's eulogy of Buddha, decides that the question can only be decided by a competition between the two religions. The chief minister is delighted: 'The youngest of Buddha's disciples', he asserts, 'will be able to withstand the heretics', and he volunteers Śāriputra as the Buddhist protagonist.

A great arena is constructed south of the city for the contest.

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The king announces that if the Buddhists win then he and all his countrymen will be converted. If they lose then Śāriputra and the chief minister will be executed. The chief minister is, not unnaturally anxious, but Śāriputra reassures him: 'This contest between the heretics and myself is like taking a fish and giving it to an otter.' Nevertheless, Śāriputra disappears just before the contest. The chief minister is distraught and rushes out to find him: this is not difficult, for Śāriputra is the only shaven-headed man in the kingdom and is found in meditation, calling on Buddha to invest him with the necessary powers for the contest. They proceed to the arena, the Buddhists sitting to the east, the heretics to the west, the king to the north, and the commoners to the south.

In the contest each side in turn conjures up extraordinary visions. The heretical monk starts with a precious mountain whose peak reaches to the Milky Way and which is covered with sightseeing immortals. Not surprisingly, the spectators gasp in amazement. Śāriputra responds by calling up a Diamond God, his feet a thousand miles square and his eyebrows 'as bushy as the twin summits of a forested mountain'. The spectators decide in favour of the Diamond God. The next two visions are of a water buffalo and a lion respectively, again both enormous. The lion seizes the water buffalo and snaps its spine, at which the buffalo breaks into pieces.

The heretical monk then creates a vast lake, but Śāriputra conjures up an elephant which sucks up all the lake water in its trunk. By this time the heretical monk 'is flushed and flaxen, his lips and mouth parched, and his innards feel as if a knife is being twisted in them'. But he is determined to beat Śāriputra and, using all his magical powers, he conjures up a poisonous dragon which blocks out the sun and makes the earth tremble. The spectators are terrified but Śāriputra remains calm, for his part conjuring up a bird which repeatedly attacks the dragon from the air, eating it bit by bit until nothing remains.

Despite these defeats, the contest continues with the heretical monk calling up two monsters. Before Śāriputra can decide how to counter them, one of the Heavenly Kings, Buddha's attendant, arrives of his own accord to confront the monsters. They throw themselves to the ground in awe and beg for their lives. Undeterred, the heretical monk calls up a giant tree. Śāriputra

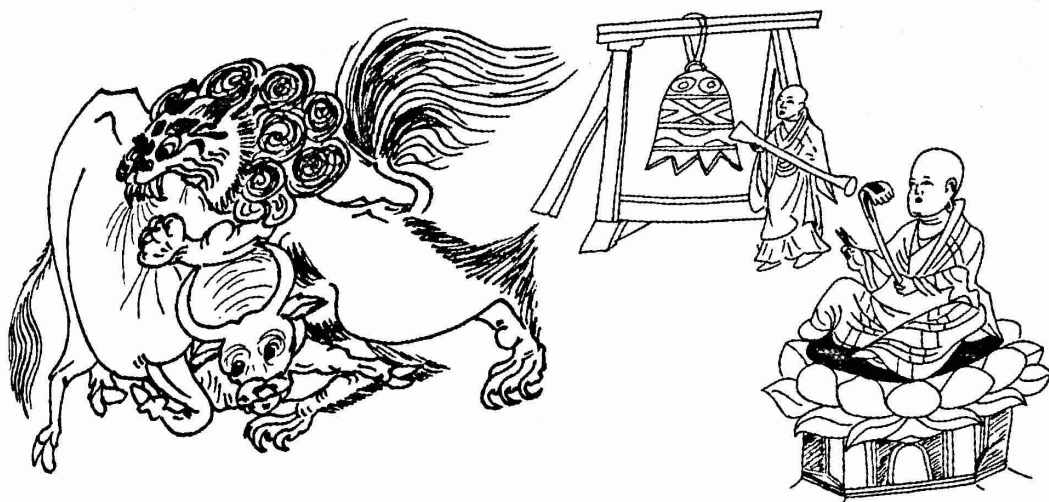


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*The story of Śāriputra: The Buddhist lion devouring the heretics' water buffalo. From a ninth-century illustrated manuscript from Dunhuang*

counters with a God of Wind who opens his bag and lets the wind blow until the tree is destroyed. At this, the king finally declares that the Buddhists have won. The heretics are tonsured and obliged to embrace Buddhism.

The story of Śāriputra was a mainstay of the travelling storyteller who set up his pitch in the marketplace and at temple fairs. As he told the story he would remove the appropriate scrolls from his rucksack and unfurl them one by one, pointing at the scroll as he spoke and embellishing various details. All except the very young knew what was going to happen next, but they none the less enjoyed the retelling.

The depiction of the story on the cave wall was, of necessity, different in format. The narrative was enclosed in frames all visible simultaneously and not revealed in stages as in the scrolls of the storyteller, but the paintings offered great scope for movement, drama and imagination. Sketches stored in the Painting Academy provided the overall design, with rough blocks of each scene and various marks to show their order and placement. There were also rough sketches of the two main protagonists. However, the detail was left to the imagination of the artist. Dong Baode had worked on this story since he was a young apprentice and knew it well, but



younger, less experienced artists would do much of the work, and the sketches were vital for them.

Once the measuring was complete, Baode and other artists sketched the outlines of the first main design with animal-hair brushes and carbon-black ink. They drew freehand, some using the sketches as guides. The next stage was to fill in the detail and colour. Baode had already checked the atelier's stock of paints, powder, brushes and other materials and had ordered in new supplies, leaving the actual preparation of the paint to more junior artists. The paints were made from mineral pigments, most of them mined in China. Azurite and malachite, the basic carbonates of copper, were traditionally used for blue and green, although in caves further west, near Kucha, lapis lazuli was also used. The pigments came in several grades, but a basic distinction was made between the dark, coarse grinds and the lighter, fine grinds. Cinnabar and minium were used for red; litharge, orpiment and ochre for yellow; and ceruse for white. Vegetable dyes were not common, except for indigo and gamboge, a yellow tree-sap imported from Cambodia.

Before noon the group of artists would stop work and descend to the dining-hall of the monastery on the valley floor below the cliff. Here they were given a meal in part-payment for their services. They worked hard and it was not long before the colouring of the main figures was complete: Śāriputra sitting on a lotus throne under a large canopy, with the heretical monk facing him across the arena. Baode then took a fine brush and ink to overpaint the figures. The rest of the scenes were completed in the same way, although by more junior artists. The donors were portrayed at the bottom of the composition and the painters left cartouches for explanatory text to be written by a local scribe.

The other major compositions were similarly painted on the remaining walls and the Heavenly Kings of the four directions were depicted on the corner segments between each sloping wall. Then Baode had to consider the lower registers and the coffered ceiling. It was common to use pounces for the latter in order to ensure that the design was repeated uniformly. The outline of the design was drawn in an ink wash on squares of thick, coarse local paper and then pricked through with a needle. Next, the artist would fill a

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cloth bag with red cinnabar powder, tie it up and attach it to the end of a long stick; scaffolding had been erected inside the cave so that the ceiling was accessible. With one hand holding the paper pounce in place on the ceiling, the artist would bang the powder bag against the paper so that, on impact, powder leaked through the rough cloth and the holes in the paper on to the ceiling behind, leaving a faint red outline. This process was continued until the whole ceiling was covered in red lines. For this particular ceiling Baode had ordered an apprentice to prepare new pounces of small Buddha figures, each sitting on a lotus throne, and decorative lotus flower motifs. The pattern was composed in tiers: on the outside several rows of the seated Buddha figure, then flying musicians and the lotus, and finally, in the very centre of the ceiling, a pair of intertwined dragons. Each artist worked with a different coloured paint, tracing around the designs and then filling them in with a few strokes until the whole was complete. The lower registers of the walls were also filled with repeating designs but there was no need to use pounces for these as they were easily accessible.

The monk administrator in charge of the commission visited the site regularly to see how the work was progressing, and other monks and nuns would also come to have a look. One day newly ordained monks and nuns, distinguished by their pale, freshly shaven heads, paid a visit. Baode showed them the painting of the heretics being tonsured and they giggled: most were still only children.

While the artists were working on the inside of the cave, carpenters, sculptors and stonemasons were brought in. The carpenters erected a wooden awning resembling the tiled roof of a temple over the entrance to the cave. Planks on either side of the entrance emulated columns. The stonemasons worked on the central U-shaped platform inside the cave, chiselling lotus designs on its two steps. The sculptors measured the platform and went away to their studio to prepare the central statue grouping. It was usual to have a grouping of three, five or seven figures with Buddha in the centre flanked by his two disciples, the youth Ananda and the old man Kāśyapa. Additional figures were of bodhisattvas and the Heavenly Kings. The local stone was too friable to be used for sculpture and so statues were modelled instead from clay stucco on an armature of wood or tamarisk. Once prepared,



*Pounce, ink on paper with pricked outlines from a design on the other side: Buddha on a lotus throne, Dunhuang, mid-tenth century*

they were put in position and painted. This cave, because of its size and importance, contained three statue groupings, each with a different manifestation of Buddha in the centre. The main grouping, with its back to the curtain wall, faced the cave entrance. Bodhisattvas were painted on the curtain wall, to either side of the Buddha figure. The placing of the statue grouping enabled worshippers to walk right round the image, and the rear of the curtain wall was also painted with elaborate designs.

The Mogao caves did, however, contain a stele made from stone commemorating Hong Bian, the most important Buddhist in the area west of the Yellow river in the previous century. He had been especially active in Dunhuang in the late ninth century after the Tibetans were ousted, and was awarded the 'Honour of Wearing Purple' by the Chinese government. After Hong Bian's death in 862, a memorial chapel was excavated from the side of another cave and a statue of him was commissioned by General Zhang, a great patron of Buddhism. The painted stucco statue, showing the

monk sitting cross-legged in a patched robe, was placed on a low, painted platform. The painting on the wall behind showed his two attendants, and his leather satchel and water bottle hanging from trees. In Baode's time the statue was still *in situ*, but several decades later it was removed so that the small cave could be put to another use. Bundles of manuscripts on paper, printed documents and silk paintings from the Dunhuang monasteries' libraries were carefully placed in the chamber and its entrance sealed and painted over. It was not reopened until 1900, when the finds included prayers and paintings commissioned by King Cao.

In contrast to the statues, the cave walls and silk paintings contained many portraits of local individuals who had acted as donors, among them members of wealthy local families, other local dignitaries, and monks and nuns. But the primary donors at this time were Dunhuang's rulers. King Cao had been depicted as a young man in a cave commissioned by one of his numerous brothers-in-law: this particular one had married his sixteenth sister. In the same cave one wall of the corridor leading to the main chamber showed King Cao's father at the head of all his sons, each holding offerings to Buddha.

Cao Yuanzhong had become ruler shortly after this portrait was finished, following the death of his two elder brothers who had in turn each ruled for only a few years. Their father had been ruler before this; and Cao Yuanzhong expected his son to succeed him. The Dunhuang court sent regular embassies to the various dynasties that had ruled parts of China since the end of the Tang in 907 and accepted the honours awarded them by successive emperors, but to all intents and purposes they were autonomous. This remained the case even after the Song dynasty reunited China in 960. King Cao had more regular contact with neighbouring kingdoms: Khotan to the west, Kocho to the north-west, and Ganzhou to the east. Relations with Khotan were excellent. Embassies passed back and forth, and Khotan's royal family sometimes visited Dunhuang. They were fervent Buddhists and had even patronized the Mogao caves, their portraits being painted by an academician on a cave wall in commemoration of their donation. There, the

king, his queen and numerous princesses all appear with elaborate coiffures, much jewellery and dressed in richly decorated silk robes.

Kocho and Ganzhou were both ruled by Uighurs, the descendants of those refugee families forced to move south after their defeat by the Kirghiz. One group had moved first to Beshbaliq, north of the Tianshan, but then had migrated across the mountains to the Turfan basin and settled in Kocho, though they continued to use Beshbaliq as their summer capital because it lay within the rich pastures of Dzungaria and was cooler than the low-lying Turfan basin. Many of the Uighurs married local people and embraced Buddhism. Kocho also had a Manichean community, mainly comprising Sogdians who had long served the merchants from their country who passed along the Silk Road in great numbers in previous centuries. But in recent decades their numbers had been swollen by refugees from Sogdiana, families who were unwilling to convert to Islam. Kocho did not enjoy good relations with its increasingly intolerant Islamic western neighbour. Both Manicheans and Buddhists patronized local cave temples near Kocho and commissioned new works in a Uighur style, distinct from the Chinese–Central Asian style of earlier caves. There was also a Nestorian Christian community, and they, too, had caves painted with scenes from their religion, one showing worshippers arriving at church on Palm Sunday. Buddhist, Manichean and Nestorian texts were also translated into Uighur from various languages: a Uighur version of *Aesop's Fables* was written during this period.

Relations with Dunhuang's Uighur neighbours were difficult, despite outward signs of friendship. King Cao maintained an uneasy peace with them during his reign, but only a few years after his death in 975, Uighurs attacked Dunhuang and forced the submission of his son, the Uighur kaghan declaring himself the legitimate ruler of Dunhuang and sending an embassy to China. He continued the long tradition of Chinese–Uighur diplomatic relations by supplying horses for the Chinese cavalry. The Chinese historians made a point of noting that they were 'good horses', probably a veiled reference to the nags that the Chinese had been forced to buy two centuries previously when Uighur fortunes were at their height.

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Even before the Uighur take-over of Dunhuang, the kingdom's large Uighur population retained their own clan organizations and their influence was felt at all levels of society from the court down. Cao Yuanzhong's father had both Chinese and Uighur wives, and after the death of his principal Chinese wife in 935, his Uighur wife became the dowager queen. This increasing Uighur influence was also evident in the art of the period. Dong Baode painted in what was considered a regional Chinese style, based on the metropolitan style that had been perfected in the Tang dynasty which had itself absorbed Indian and Persian influences. From the height of the Tang in the late seventh and early eighth centuries, the style filtered back along the Silk Road, where it was absorbed into local styles and itself absorbed new styles. In the eighth century six Chinese artists travelled to Turkic lands to paint a portrait of the dead kaghan. His brother was so pleased with the likeness that he sent a gift of fifty horses in return. Chinese artists were also requested by the Tibetan court, and here a distinct style also developed, influenced initially by Indian, Nepalese and Chinese artists and then, from the late tenth century, by Khotanese artists.

The Dunhuang Painting Academy was the beneficiary of these cross-cultural influences and of the region's unsettled history over the past century. Tibetan artists had been resident since the Tibetan occupation, and Uighurs since the end of the Uighur kingdom, and in the tenth century these new influences started to be seen in the Mogao cave paintings, some donors even requesting certain artists and styles. The artists were professional and able to distinguish between genres, but motifs and some small stylistic features crept across the divides. Earlier styles were reworked as caves were renovated. One painting, which still exists, shows the main Buddha figure in traditional Chinese Silk Road style, with secondary figures in Tibetan style.

The Great Buddha Temple was the largest cave among the hundreds in the complex. Its huge statue of Buddha had been erected early in the eighth century, when Dunhuang was under the control of a Chinese dynasty at the height of its powers, and before the rebellion of Rokhshan. The Buddha figure was in typical high-Tang Chinese style, moulded from clay on a rock core which was left when the rest of the cave had been excavated. The

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workmen of the time also excavated a tunnel around the back of the figure and carpenters built a wooden staircase leading up to the head of the Buddha and a four-storey pagoda jutting out from the cliff face to protect the statue from the elements.

By 966 the cave was in need of repair. It was the end of the fifth month and King Cao and Lady Zhai were visiting the caves to perform pious acts following a month of fasting. Two of the wooden platforms around the colossal Buddha were rotten and when the king and his wife were approached, they readily agreed to fund the restoration. The work started on the nineteenth day and was completed in less than ten days. New timber was obtained from stores in the town – the poplar wood in the valley itself was too dry – and workmen were also hired in Dunhuang, the monastery at the cave temples providing them with food and wine. During this initial work, additional problems were discovered. The cave temple administration approached Cao again and he agreed to provide more funds for a second stage of restoration on which fifty-six carpenters and ten plasterers were employed. The end of the work was celebrated with a great banquet.

King Cao and Lady Zhai were not Dong Baode's only patrons. As the phrase had it, 'his brush was moistened' by most wealthy members of the community at one time or another, as well as by visiting royalty and ambassadors. He was often asked to prepare silk paintings and banners for display at Buddhist services or for use in the numerous festivals which punctuated the year. One of the most profitable of these for Dong Baode was the procession of the Buddha's image.

Dunhuang had adopted his ceremony from Khotan where it had been immensely popular since the fifth century. It was held on various days throughout the year, such as Buddha's birthday and the Moon Festival. A large statue of Buddha was placed in a cart and decorated with gold and silver, garlands and banners. The cart was followed by others containing statues of bodhisattvas and the Heavenly Kings. Before the procession started on its journey out of the city to the cave temples the streets were swept and sprinkled with water, the gates of the city were closed off with vast curtains and the statues were washed with fragrant water by the monks.

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The procession made its way along the dusty track towards the cave temple. The carts were followed by all the monks and nuns, led by the king, who was wearing a new cloak and burning the finest incense in a long-handled gilt incense-holder inlaid with gems. In Khotan there had been fourteen days of processions attended by all the monks in the region, and each day the statue of a famous local monk was part of the procession. There, the carts carrying the Buddha statue were constructed into five-storeyed pagodas, and there were twenty or more carts. In Dunhuang the celebrations were shorter and less elaborate but it was still a major event, and everyone who could afford it paid for offerings and decorations. Many of the numerous banners held aloft by the monks and hung from the carts were Baode's work. The banners usually depicted a bodhisattva or a Heavenly King and were made from one strip of silk, which came in standard widths of about 2 feet. Once the painting itself was complete, a triangular head-piece of bordered silk was sewn on to the top of the painting with a loop from which to hang it. The base was stiffened with a piece of bamboo or wood. Two long, thin strips of dyed silk were then sewn down each side of the painting, and three or four long strips added at the bottom. Another stiffener was fixed between these and the bottom of the painting itself. Banners on hemp were commissioned by those who could not afford silk, but Baode did not take these commissions.

Up to three widths of silk were used for the larger paintings enabling Baode to compose elaborate scenes of Buddhist paradises, with the central Buddha figure on a lotus throne, surrounded by his attendants and with scenes from Buddha's former lives on the outer register. Baode would make a careful full-size sketch of the whole composition before starting to paint. A space was left at the bottom for donor portraits, but increasingly he was being asked to make the portraits much larger so that they encroached into the main scene itself. Sometimes the donor figures were almost as large as the subject of the painting.

Baode's contemporaries in Chang'an, the Song dynasty capital, regarded Dunhuang as little more than a provincial backwater,



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forgetting the great heyday of the Silk Road and the debt they themselves owed to Silk Road art and culture. The new Chinese emperor was a keen patron of the arts and the imperial painting academy attracted cultured individuals versed in literature and painting, able to draw on the works of the past masters and painting manuals held in the imperial collections, certain of the moral and artistic superiority of their works over all others. Their names are known, but most of their works have been lost. The works of Baode and his contemporaries on the Silk Road, however, though their names have long been forgotten, are still admired today.