

# The Aesthetic of Ruins in Dunhuang Murals

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Received: 14 January 2025; Accepted: 31 March 2025; Published: 1 April 2025

## ABSTRACT

*The Mogao Caves in Dunhuang are the world's largest and richest extant Buddhist art site, with relics from thousands of years of overlapping and merging civilizations. Dunhuang murals are a fading, disappearing work of art. This paper analyzes the aesthetic characteristics of Dunhuang murals from four aspects: composition, style, lines, and colors. The reasons for the formation of the Dunhuang mural texture are analyzed through the mottled outlines and faded traces on Dunhuang murals. The erosion of this ancient artwork by nature and humans has produced a delicate beauty similar to the beauty of ruins. This special aesthetic quality has been discussed by Ginsberg (2004), that is, gradual erosion produces new unity and artistic form. The passage of time has endowed Dunhuang murals with three characteristics: the beauty of traces, the beauty of harmony, and the beauty of mistiness. These qualities are also symbols and metaphors for the state of impermanence. The author explores the aesthetic qualities of the texture of Dunhuang murals, especially the peeling and discoloration. The aesthetic of ruins in Dunhuang murals is not merely a historical or cultural phenomenon; it also holds profound implications for contemporary art and philosophy. The concept of ruin aesthetics transcends the boundaries of time and space, offering a unique perspective on the interplay between creation and decay, permanence and impermanence.*

**Keywords:** Aesthetic of Ruins, Dunhuang Mural, Texture, Material.



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## 1 THE AESTHETIC FEATURES OF THE DUNHUANG MURALS

While prior research about Dunhuang murals has focused on their preservation, this paper explores their evolving aesthetic as a reflection of time and impermanence. Existing studies often emphasize the murals' historical and cultural significance, but few delve into how natural and human-induced decay contributes to their aesthetic value. This study fills this gap by examining how the passage of time and environmental factors have transformed the murals into a unique form of ruin aesthetics, offering new insights into the interplay between art, nature, and time. Destruction is a choice. It has been preserved as a relic of something valuable from the past (Ginsberg, 2004). Ancient sites are so attractive that they can bring a lot of creative inspiration by recording their materials and obtaining visual information, especially for the Dunhuang murals which express the confrontation between the human spirit and nature and the human's useless pursuit of material immortality. The elapse of time is irreversible while ruin is an inevitable destiny. However, the passing of time strengthens the aesthetics of ruin to the greatest extent. The mottled shape and the discolouration of the Dunhuang murals are the impermanence brought by the passage of time, an embodiment of Ruin Aesthetics. To see sensuously and intuitively

this unique immateriality in ruins is to be convinced of a possible dynamic aesthetics of ruins, which are products of the ‘processive co-creativity’ of nature and man, both of man the artist and of man the percipient (Hetzler, 1982). With the historical remains of the fused civilization across thousands of years, Mogao Grottoes at Dunhuang is the largest and the most-informative Buddhist art pilgrimage in the world today. Traces of time can be found on the Dunhuang art treasure as many murals turn blurred in details, impaired in surface and fuzzy in colours. Due to the restriction of craftsmanship and materials, both natural and human factors, such as erosion by wind and rain, chemical change, war and pollution, have exfoliated the mural surface and blurred the colours. However, it is intriguing that the missing information does not destroy the perfection of the Dunhuang art but makes it even more charming. Inspired by this, contemporary artists begin to re-examine the historical and cultural features of the Dunhuang murals to explore the art pursuit and to expand the creative ideas based on the reflections of the exfoliated and discoloured beauty. The aesthetic features of the Dunhuang murals can be analysed from the following four aspects.

## 1.1 Composition

The mural composition shall cater to subjective and objective factors, including the content as well as the shape, area, material, and texture of the wall. According to the investigation, the grotto mural composition of the Sui and Tang dynasties is always associated with the content. And the common compositions are in the forms of symmetry, primary images, sequential art, screen paintings and long scrolls. Meanwhile, the theme also has an impact on the mural composition while the human characters in the murals shall be properly arranged based on the plots. In that case, images and human characters can be unconditionally located according to the proper structural order of the murals to present a complete story with well-spaced beauty and complexity in order. The sequential art composition that makes each painting an independent story will also help relieve the visual fatigue of the audience. Just like *The Jataka Tale of the Deer King* (鹿王本生图), which adopts a sequential art composition. It primarily tells the story of Sakyamuni's previous incarnation—a beautiful nine-coloured deer king—who saves a man from drowning, only to be betrayed by him later.



**Figure 1** Mogao Grottoes Cave 257, West wall, The Jataka Tale of the Deer King. AD 386-534

(Source: Courtesy of the Dunhuang Academy, 2021, Copyright Consent: Permissible to Publish)

## 1.2 Style

The murals of the Sui and Tang dynasties mark the maturity of ancient Chinese art, particularly in the portrayal of human figures. The artistic images are dignified, well-proportioned, lavishly dressed, and vividly accurate, embodying a sense of beauty. The methods of shaping artistic figures are primarily reflected in the expressive techniques of mural art. In ancient Chinese art, there are two main approaches: stylization and realism. Generally, realism dominates, but stylization is also present, used to better highlight the beauty of the figures. Most Dunhuang murals are realistic, with vivid and lifelike depictions of objective phenomena. However, this realism is not mere naturalistic imitation but rather an expression of spirit through form, aiming for a balance between form and spirit. Nevertheless, many figures in the murals are stylized. For example, the figures of Fuxi and Nüwa are depicted with human heads and serpent bodies. Additionally, many flying apsaras (飞天) are portrayed with exaggerated and stylized forms to emphasize the sensation of flight. Since flying is a fantastical concept, the depiction of flying apsaras inevitably relies on artistic exaggeration and stylization. Yet, this does not make them appear unrealistic; on the contrary, it conveys a sense of lightness and artistic beauty.

This *Bodhisattva of Beauty* (美人菩萨) was created during the early Tang dynasty. The figure is depicted with a dignified and luxurious appearance, wearing a golden crown and draped in sheer garments. Her eyes are slightly lowered, one hand gently holding the sheer fabric over her shoulder, while the other is poised gracefully in front of her chest. The overall form is exquisitely beautiful.



**Figure 2** Mogao Grottoes Cave 57, South wall, Bodhisattva of Beauty. AD 618-907  
(Source: Courtesy of the Dunhuang Academy, 2021, Copyright Consent: Permissible to Publish)

## 1.3 Lines

To sculpt images in simple strokes, lines are a major expressive form and an important ink language in traditional Chinese painting. Dunhuang murals of the Sui and Tang Dynasties are shaped in lines with a unified brushwork style while heavy lines are used to highlight the features of the human characters. It is to present a magnificent image by depicting the styles of human characters and accentuating their ethereal and peaceful looks. The lines' integrity and rhythmicity are especially emphasized for the painting of clothes texture to disclose the underneath body shape (Liang, 2017).



**Figure 3** Mogao Grottoes Cave 103, South side of the east wall, The Teaching of Vimalakirti. AD 618-907

(Source: Courtesy of the Dunhuang Academy, 2021, Copyright Consent: Permissible to Publish)

Among the many line-drawing paintings in the Dunhuang murals, one of the most outstanding representative works is *The Teaching of Vimalakirti* (维摩演教图). In the artistic style of the Tang dynasty, the depiction of the Vimalakirti Sutra on the eastern wall is particularly classic and stands as one of the era's most remarkable masterpieces. Analysing this artwork, we can observe that the artist employed a relatively monochromatic palette when portraying the figure of Vimalakirti, using bold lines to emphasize the character's features. This artistic technique had been perfected to a high degree, with a unified brushwork style that typically utilized the 'iron-wire line' (铁线描) and 'orchid-leaf line' (兰叶描) techniques. These methods fully captured the figure's simplicity, dignity, and ethereal composure. When considering the facial details, the artist not only highlighted the raised eyebrows and slightly open mouth but also made subtle adjustments to the expression between the eyebrows, resulting in a more vivid and engaging portrayal. In rendering the drapery, the artist emphasized the integrity and rhythm of the lines, while also revealing the underlying structure of the figure's form.

## 1.4 Colours

The pigments used in the Dunhuang murals include red (such as red ochre, cinnabar and red lead), green (mineral green and atacamite), blue (lazurite and azurite), white (kaolin and pearl powder), etc. With high stability, these pigments can retain their colours even after thousands of years. Natural mineral pigments are extensively adopted in murals as they are long-lasting, stable in chemical structure and fading resistant. Therefore, the gorgeous colours of the Dunhuang murals not only bear strong tints and shades but also change as time goes by. (Liang, 2017). Generally speaking, the background colour of Dunhuang murals is the first to be painted, so the background colour has a decisive influence on the entire mural. Under the effect of the background colour, some scattered images are combined and presented to the audience in an integrated form. Because Dunhuang murals are the main art form of grottoes, when combined with the relevant characteristics of its architectural culture, the use of colours also highlights the magnificence and mystery.

*The Reverse-Holding Pipa* (反弹琵琶) in Cave 112 is a classic masterpiece of Tang dynasty murals, renowned for its distinctive use of colour, which reflects the exceptional skill and unique aesthetic style



of Tang dynasty mural art. The mural predominantly employs warm tones, particularly through the use of earthy base colours and ochre, creating a warm and luxurious atmosphere. The entire mural features a rich palette, including ochre, green, yellow, white, and other colours. However, these colours are not applied haphazardly; instead, they are skilfully combined to achieve a harmonious and unified visual effect. The colours in the mural are layered with both contrast and transition, showcasing the maturity of Tang dynasty mural art in color application.



**Figure 4** Mogao Grottoes Cave 112, East side of the south wall, The Reverse-Holding Pipa. AD 618-907

(Source: Courtesy of the Dunhuang Academy, 2021, Copyright Consent: Permissible to Publish)

## 2 THE TEXTURE ANALYSIS OF THE DUNHUANG MURALS

The analysis of Dunhuang murals in this study is based on the combination of visual analysis and documentary data analysis. Through visual analysis, the murals' composition, style, lines and colours are studied, focusing on how these elements have been affected by natural and human-induced decay. Documentary data analysis is used to gain insights into the materials and techniques used in mural paintings, and the impact of environmental factors on their current status.

With a history of more than one thousand years and under the influence of natural forces, Dunhuang murals have had serious wind erosion, oxidation and exfoliation, plus irreparable man-made damage. Therefore, people can't appreciate the original murals as the incomplete and mottled colours in the pictures are far away from what they used to be. However, it is the special texture resulting from exfoliation and discolouration that is attractive and astonishing. The images that the painters endeavoured to present are in huge contradiction to the naturally eroded ones (Zhang, 2017). A ruin as a work of man and as a work of nature is the measure of man and the measure of maturity, neither of which measures is adequately measurable. They come together in a spiritual encounter, neither can adequately measure the other. The ruin constituted by these two approximating measures, if it is a real ruin, is indeed an aesthetic object, an aesthetic encounter, a unique work with its beauty (Hetzler, 1982). But they've become a perfect match in the Dunhuang murals, a response to the Aesthetics of Ruin.

All the elements, such as the numerous blurred lines, the fuzzy colours, and the colour variation due to the material conditionality, have covered a special veil for the Dunhuang murals. The implicit or the missing information, caused by the surface exfoliation of some areas, has also brought traces of time through desquamation, discolouration, mottle and deformity. But what is interesting is that the varied and missing image information brings to the audience the experience of double appreciation as it has become even more mysterious after the baptism of time and the varied or incomplete colours have brought to the murals a sense of primitivity, vicissitude and mystery. For example, visual or psychological associations often unify incomplete and fragmentary objects, which may not have been expected by the ancient painters when they were creating. In the Dunhuang murals, the variation or

mottled colours show their own unique charm, which seems to be intentionally involved in the work of color creation in order to make the Dunhuang murals more modern in style or meaning.

## 2.1 Crafts and Materials

Mogao Grotto Murals at Dunhuang belong to grotto frescoes, the structure of which is usually superimposed with the supporter, the base and the pigment layer.

The supporter mainly refers to the rock mass, including the stonewalls in the manually excavated grottos and the natural precipices. The main function of supporters is to bear the murals on their surface. Considering the uneven surface of the rocks, mural painters tend to cover the rocks with the base layer before the pigment layer to provide a smoother surface for painting (Yu, 2013). Thus, the quality of the base layer will directly impact the stability of the murals as it levels the surface of the rock. The making of the base layer may vary in different regions, ages and forms as it is usually adjusted according to the local conditions. For the Dunhuang murals, the base layer is a coating made from the natural sedimentary soil of the riverbed plus some plant fibres for better durability and strength.

The underpainting layer, also known as the whitening layer or the base colour of a mural, is the white pigment on top of the fine silt layer, made from calcium hydroxide, kaolinite, gypsum, and other ingredients to contrast the main colours of the murals (Zhang, 2015). The pigment layer, the outmost layer for painting with the mixed cement of multiple-coloured pigments on the underpainting layer, is the most informative main body of a mural in key protection. A mural no longer visually exists if its pigment layer is completely gone.

The pigments used for the Dunhuang murals can be categorized into organic pigment, inorganic pigment and non-pigment substance. Most of the pigments are made from local minerals; some others are finished or semi-finished products delivered from inland China and still others are from the western regions. The pigments are either multi-colour mixed or used independently (Wu, 2003).

Since the mineral pigments have zero adhesion, bonding and colour-fixing elements must be added to make the mineral pigment particles adhesive and sticky. Therefore, cementing materials are extensively used in ancient murals. Animal gelatine like bone glue and hide glue as well as vegetable gelatine like peach gum are the common two types of materials (Li, 1993). There is no standard quantity of the cementing materials used in the Dunhuang murals and it is determined by the painters' intuition and experience.

## 2.2 Causes of Formation

Located in the Gobi Desert with little rainfall and year-round drought, the grotto area is the typical desert climate as evaporation capacity far outweighs precipitation. According to the record, the annual average rainfall is only around 30 mm while the annual amount of evaporation reaches as high as 4200 mm. The drought inevitably brings the problem of wind-blown sand. The abundant dunes around the Mogao Grottoes and the Mingsha Mountain in the west provide a constant supply of sand. As a result, under the lasting effect of wind-blown sand, the rock mass of the Dunhuang murals has the serious problem of weathering erosion. In addition to the sand, the weather is also less favourable. In the grottoes area, dust storms and sand-blowing are very common in summer and the wind-blown sand migration leads to sand deposition as well as erosion and shedding of rocks and murals. Moreover, the murals are not only eroded by sand but also affected by long-time sunlight. With the annual sunshine duration of almost 3000 hours and the huge diurnal temperature variation, the humidity inside the grottoes fluctuates sharply according to the change of seasons and the increase in sunlight intensity (Ji, 2020). Under the alternating impact of long-time cold, heat, dryness and dampness, the ground and the pigment layer both suffer from serious flaking and colour-fading (Shi, 1997). And the ever-lasting intense sunshine will accelerate the ageing of the organic cementing materials mixed in the pigments. The red pigments, in low adhesion, drop off in powder and fade in colour (Li, 1989). Cheap or low-

quality materials normally fade faster than expensive materials (Ernesto, 2024). And as a popular tourist attraction, Mogao Grottoes can't escape from the lighting equipment that contains ultraviolet rays and infrared rays, both of which will cause damage to the murals.

### 3 AESTHETIC EFFECT

Ruins are formed by both art (man) and nature and, thus, exist somewhere between these two forces (Zucker, 1968). Due to natural or man-made damage, the current murals considerably differ from what they used to be. The Dunhuang murals today are the result of both natural and human factors while the mottled parts diffuse a unique sense of beauty. At the same time, the limitations of production technology and materials have led to the change of colour of the murals and the peeling of the surface of the murals. This loss of information has contributed to the incompleteness of the overall picture and caused traces of "peeling" and "discolouration" of the murals. With the passage of time and the changes in history, the colour and shape of the murals have also changed. The original colour of the graphic image has changed to grey-black, the smudge line has changed to a thick black line, and the face with white eyes and a white nose has turned black and white. In the original exquisite painting style, the shapes are finely depicted, the colours are bright and the lines are smooth. The roughness, strong colours, wild lines and grotesque images of the murals give the murals a dual beauty of ancient and modern appearance. As time passes, they are covered with a layer of historical colour, which is more pure, calm and elegant. The beauty of the mottled and incomplete Dunhuang murals originated from the power and authenticity of time, a real reflection of the true face. The seemingly unpredictable traces, bearing natural elements and texture symbols, remind me of the abstract language in paintings and the mysterious oriental verve for endless fun through time and space travel. The change, in the long river of history, must dominantly manifest itself so that the unique aesthetic value of the mass discoloured and washed-out murals becomes an embodiment of artistic life. As an implicit performance of ancient Chinese art, the so-called ruined murals blur the surface images to leave space for imagination and burst out a new form of beauty in natural contingency.

Ruins are unique in the realm of damaged art because they maintain an aesthetic unity. Even though the original intent of the builder may be lost and the structure itself is lying in fragments, the ruin still can make a complete or satisfying statement. Nevertheless, ruins possess an aesthetic appeal, one that is unique and emotionally intricate (Ruppert, 1982). As time passes, the murals become incomplete when they shed with missing information. However, the mottled parts also represent the unique beauty of ruin. The faded colours and the shedding blocks not only add to time a sense of narration but also present a strong fullness and abiogeny as aesthetically the incompleteness can be regarded as the flow and embellishment of the brushwork. In other words, it is more appropriate to be considered a classic but incomplete beauty of ruin. The traces of time should have been destructive. But it brings surprising and interesting changes to the paintings. The unique features of some traces have become so necessary and reasonable that they have played an important role in making the whole painting more marvellous (Ji, 2020).

#### 3.1 The Beauty of Traces

The traces of time should be destructive, but they have brought about unexpected and interesting changes in the painting. The unique characteristics of some traces have become an inevitable and reasonable existence in the painting, and even become one of the important factors that make the whole painting more wonderful. The naturally caused fissure or detachment on the surface colour layer, either large or small, dense or loose, in lines or blocks, has contributed to a new structural relationship among dots, lines and planes in the paintings. The unique effect, the result of both natural and human influence, diffuses the beauty of traces. It is perfectly integrated with the original content, making the whole picture more heavy, rich and natural in texture, and full of visual changes, which is very attractive. This texture change brought by the traces makes the whole picture have another kind of brilliance.

Traces tend to have their texture, some of which are of aesthetic value. For example, the dry bark textures on the branches of rotten wood, straight or curved, sparse or dense, give us different psychological feelings. Or the texture traces that can be captured everywhere on the walls and the ground of old industrial bases, mostly rough in visual perception, but these textures are also divided into some delicate and some rough; some look neatly arranged and some are messy. The coloured patches of incompleteness, breakage, mould and exfoliation on the murals in Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes have formed an exclusive artistic beauty although they've experienced discolouration in their long history. The discolouration exists with its beauty of incompleteness. The mottled colours are not only the accumulation of history but also the charming carrier of artistic conception and philosophy. Even with the erosion in Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes over thousands of years, the damaged, mouldy, and exfoliated murals are still heart-touching and dream-haunting.

The exfoliated traces represent incompleteness and changing forms. The status quo of the murals is unexpected and out of control from the painters thousands of years ago. The historical traces with the passage of artistic information will keep changing in the future, which will bring a different visual sensation to the audience.

The damage and missing white mineral pigments underneath the murals reveal the clay colour of the walls, bringing a sense of calmness and restraint against the overall elegant tone of the Dunhuang murals. Even the grass stem fibres exposed by the peeling of the base layer have increased the richness and uncertainty of the Mogao Grottoes murals from a visual perspective. When the picture is no longer complete and clear in front of people, there are irregular discontinuities, which increase the randomness of the art form. This is our visual response to the mural images. The peeling incompleteness brings a unique visual experience and a unique natural interest. Facing the mural, people will have a strong visual impact from the mottled texture as well as a sense of tranquillity and obsolescence from the texture of the murals. The missing parts will lead to a series of images of the characters' posture and the story plots. When images fail to deliver the intention of the painters, it gives the audience a second opportunity to create. What the audience sees and what is in their mind comes up with their understanding of the images, which may be completely different from what the creator wants to deliver. When appreciating the incomplete Dunhuang murals, the compensation and recreation of the missing parts must be done through imagination. Incompleteness, an unfinished or lost state with vacancy and absence, is an unstable, unclear, inadequate and incomplete form. It is the missing or lost parts that allow something out of nothing. The potential in existence or non-visualization that breeds a stronger life for beauty is endowed with a fresher aesthetic vitality and tension for the infinite aesthetic implication (Yu, 2014).

With the baptism of time and damage from uncontrollable natural factors, the colour has changed, and the surface has become peeling and mottled. However, the murals have created a wonderful and magical feeling. They have not lost their beauty and value due to their current incompleteness. This incompleteness instead shows another unique charm of the Dunhuang murals, which is precisely an important feature of the work and an integral part of its artistic value. In Dunhuang Cave 71, the mural *Transformation of the Amitabha Sutra: Bodhisattva* (阿弥陀经变之菩萨) depicts two pensive bodhisattvas. The upper bodhisattva wears a jewelled crown, with hair styled in a high bun and black locks cascading over the shoulders. Seated on a lotus, the figure twists slightly to one side, forming a mudra with the right hand while gazing intently at it, lost in deep contemplation. The lower bodhisattva has flowed blue hair and a natural posture, with the left hand resting on the hip and the right elbow supported on the right knee. The area where the right hand meets the cheek has partially lost its pigment, adding a touch of mystery to the bodhisattva's eternal smile, while the pensive expression conveys a profound inner serenity. Much of the pigment on the mural has flaked away, revealing the underlying earthen tones, which harmonize beautifully with the remaining vibrant colours. The weathered and peeling colours on the glazed tiles add a natural texture to the surface.





**Figure 5** Mogao Grottoes Cave 71, On the north wall, Transformation of the Amitabha Sutra: Bodhisattva. AD 618-907 (Source: Courtesy of the Dunhuang Academy, 2021, Copyright Consent: Permissible to Publish)

### 3.2 The Beauty of Harmony

Dunhuang murals have gone through more than a thousand years from the Sixteen Kingdoms to the Yuan Dynasty. Discolouration is an inevitable problem in murals of all dynasties, especially serious in murals of the Sui, Early Tang, Song and Yuan Dynasties. The passage of time leaves the chemical change on the murals' surface that the original flesh red colour turns into dark brown on faces and other exposed body skin. This is also the reason why many existing paintings of the Flying Apsaras are in black. However, the Dunhuang murals gain an indescribable mystery of time and give the audience a pleasant sensation of double appreciation.

The harmonious colouration and the mottled effect after erosion make us not only regretful and amazed at the irresistible natural forces but also interested in the phenomenon. The lowered saturability coordinates the different colour blocks which used to be in sharp contrast. The calm and coordinating middle grey, accidentally obtained over time, better fits contemporary aesthetics. The change and exfoliation of some colour blocks also enhance the sense of depth and enjoyment. All the changing elements unexpectedly add to the murals a unique and mysterious beauty with a sense of heavy and intriguing vicissitude.

Intuitively appreciated, many discolouration of the current murals has become an organic part of it, or even a key factor in the image reconstruction, which has made it different from its initial look. The discolouration also leads to a huge change in the whole colour structure and artistic conception as the new images evolved from the original ones have brought to the audience an unprecedented visual experience with its special and intensified effect. Due to the discolouration, the detailed depiction of object features has been weakened to the more concise colour blocks, an indispensable and powerful part of the new images. In this case, colours have shifted from a language for detailed narration to an independent language of colour itself, a part of the images. In other words, the narrative function of images is weakened and the image language has become more absolute. If visitors and researchers go closer to figuring out how it is integrated into the original image language to present a new image without losing its unique style and soul, they will indeed get some inspiration on how to deal with colours differently from this accidental discolouration.

### 3.3 The Beauty of Mistiness

Undoubtedly, the natural change of seasons is bound to leave numerous marks of age on the Dunhuang murals. All the natural elements work together to cover a special veil to this pearl dropped in the sea as a large number of painting features have dimmed and colours have become hazier and hazier. People can only rely on their unique images to make up the missing parts, but the hazy images can also lead people into a deeper realm.

The beauty of mistiness refers to the illusory and misty aesthetic sensation obtained through the appreciation and imagination of those vague and uncertain objects with an indescribable implicitly. It brings more possibilities for creativity through ambiguous and uncertain imagery. The pursuit of hazy beauty in traditional Chinese painting is the reflection of aesthetic appeals of mistiness when it expresses the perception of nature and the life experience in the combination of poem and painting. The lifelikeness, vibe and artistic conception that the traditional Chinese painting has paid great attention to over thousands of years manifest the aesthetic ideal of nihility and the feature of hazy beauty in Chinese art. Highlighting the holistic perception of mass structure and weakening the functions of lines, the beauty of mistiness makes use of vacancy for a better rhythm as well as a smart arrangement of emptiness and fullness. The light, heavy, strong, and gentle lines are processed flexibly to produce a sense of mistiness through emptiness and fullness as well as motion and motionlessness. And even the meticulous depiction of details, as the backdrop for the main body, is to create a sense of truth and false.

The hazy beauty of the Dunhuang murals originated from the fuzziness of the original lines as well as the ambiguity of colours caused by exfoliation and discolouration. The altered colours of the murals will lead to the deficiency of the painting's language as well as the change in the painting's form and style. Dunhuang murals, with the major sculpting method of lines, inherit the artistic language of lines in traditional Chinese painting. However, the damaged and discoloured lines, which get lighter or even faded in colour when the surface content is gone, have lost their initial function as the framework. When images are no longer inherent and lines are no longer sleek, the original image language has been replaced by a new language form since lines are no longer the main manifestation of vitality. In addition, the sandstorms and long-term accumulation of dust caused by environmental factors in Dunhuang have caused the dust layer to adhere to the pigment layer. If it is not removed in time, it will continue to penetrate and merge with the murals. Mineral pigments are crystalline structures. The original particles have strong reflection and refraction of light, making the colours more gorgeous; while dust and dust seem to cover these particles with a layer of gauze, blocking the characteristics of mineral pigments, affecting the colour of the pigments, and softening the colours themselves. The traces left by history have created the current beauty of traditional murals. After years of scouring and baptism, the traces of dust covering, peeling, and friction have formed a rich and heavy texture effect, and the colours appear more harmonious and unified, showing a kind of implicit and profound beauty. The murals' harmonious colours and grey tones after the colour change are no less significant than the original colours. They not only unify the picture, but also ease the contrast, and produce endless enrichment to the picture levels; the oxidized red, the blackened white, the dust on the surface, and the original hue inside, the colour changes are subtle and implicit under various factors. And, some Dunhuang Mogao grottoes used to be inhabited so the fire used for cooking and heating has also caused serious smoke contamination to the murals. The colours can be vaguely distinguished on the smoke-dried murals while the more serious pollution has contaminated the murals into black, destroying the original colours as well as leaving a thicker and darker effect compared to other grottoes. The deepening, darkening, greying or fading colours have weakened the sharp colour contrast and blurred the images. The boundary between form and colour has been broken and the murals diffuse a sense of chaos. Although the obscured visualization devours the details, it infuses more contingent natural elements besides the distinguishing features. As Kant says: 'Art can only be considered beautiful when something that we know is art looks like naturally born.'

Aesthetics has different tendencies due to different times and nationalities. The appreciation habits and aesthetic moods of aesthetic perceivers are different, which creates ambiguous and hazy aesthetic

effects and produces polysemous and vague aesthetic information. If standard rules are used to accurately analyse and identify aesthetic feelings and imaginations, it fundamentally violates the essence of art. Only a certain degree of ambiguity can reveal the life and vitality of the hazy and vague aesthetic object.

## **4 CONCLUSION**

Aesthetically, ruin means the passage of time, the representation of the unreal past, the existence of the individual life and the materialization of human civilization in the dimension of both time and space. It is in man-made things that we are more likely to understand and grasp the concept of time. That is why ruins so effectively impress on our life's transience (Goldstein, 1977). The moment we appreciate the ruin is face-to-face communication with history and imagination of the unknown future. The aesthetic value does not lie in the feasibility or monetary value of the object you see but in your aesthetic stance and attitude. The strong aesthetic content that incomplete beauty has delivered, the romance and pathos in the nostalgia of ruin, have penetrated various cultural domains today with the development of Romanticism (Liu, 2021). Today the aesthetic imagination of ruin is still mostly based on Romanticism. If the romantic painting, on behalf of the western aesthetics of ruin, emphasizes the emotional expression of an individual's melancholy in face of ruins and records ruin as a special vanishing architectural culture, the Chinese aesthetics of ruin pays more attention to the historical and cultural awareness in the ruin appreciation, an exclamation of individual life against the grand narration. The artistic expression, under the awareness of Ruin Aesthetics, is the re-perception of our existence and significance. The damaged Dunhuang murals make people sigh for the nihility and fragility of prosperity while the past diffuses the vicissitude of time and the impermanence of life. Instant and constancy, death and eternity, change and fixedness fuse to one in infinite time and space.

The findings of this study have significant implications for future research, artistic practices, and conservation efforts. The aesthetic of ruins in Dunhuang murals offers a unique perspective on how decay and impermanence can enhance the artistic value of cultural heritage. Future research could explore how these aesthetic principles can be applied to contemporary art, particularly in the context of environmental art and installations that emphasize the passage of time. By embracing the aesthetic of ruins, artists can create works that resonate with the transient nature of human existence and the enduring beauty of impermanence. The Dunhuang murals, with their layered history of erosion and transformation, serve as a powerful metaphor for the fragility of human endeavours and the enduring beauty of impermanence. Moreover, the aesthetic of ruins resonates with philosophical frameworks that emphasize the cyclical nature of existence. In Eastern philosophies, particularly Daoism and Buddhism, the concept of impermanence is central to understanding the transient nature of life and the universe. The Dunhuang murals, as they weather and fade, embody this philosophical ideal, reminding us of the impermanence of all things. This connection between ruin aesthetics and philosophical thought offers a rich ground for further exploration, particularly in how contemporary artists and thinkers can draw inspiration from ancient art to address modern existential questions.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

Dr. Tetriana Ahmed Fauzi guided this study. The author appreciates her substantial assistance and support. Thanks to the Courtesy of the Dunhuang Academy for providing so many mural photos for researchers to use.

## **FUNDING**

This research is self-funded.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The first author responds to the writing of this paper. The second author for the suggestions on the paper's structure and abstract. The third author for improving the article's content. The fourth author for the writing details.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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