

Understanding of the Imitation of Qiuci Grottoes Murals

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Abstract: This article combines the experience of imitating the murals in Cave 11 of Kizilgaha Grottoes, analyzes the relationship between graphics, colors, and materials of the imitation works, sorts out the language characteristics of ancient Qiuci murals, explores the inevitable connection between the limitations of natural geology and the generation of painting language, and thinks about the possibility of multi-directional extension of rock-color in contemporary time and space.

Keywords: Rock color painting; Qiuci Grottoes murals; Copying

In June 2021, the author participated in the Rock color painting course “Qiuci Facing the Wall” for the first time, visited the Bezeklik, Kizil, Kumtura, Senmusem, Kizilgaha and other grottoes, and copied the murals in Kizilgaha Grottoes. Being in the caves and communicating with the murals, today’s painters and ancient painters overlapped at a certain point in time and space. This is completely different from the feeling of copying from prints in the classroom. The exchange of time and space, the inner feelings and reverence are indescribable.

1. Analysis of the language characteristics of Qiuci murals

1.1 Plane modeling and layer superposition

In the “Qiuci Facing the Wall” course, the author copied a part of the mural on the right side of the vault ceiling of the main room of Cave 11 of Kizilgaha Grottoes. The content of the mural is a typical diamond grid composition form.

The composition of Qiuci murals cleverly uses the diamond grid pattern of Mount Xumi as the formal skeleton. This unique artistic treatment method visually presents an amazing spatial aesthetic effect. The rich and varied Buddhist stories are organized into a diamond-shaped structure of the entire cave, which is very wonderful. What is more clever is that the pre-designed conceptual diamond grid is not aggressive, because it has been dismembered by the specific black, white and gray structure and color structure, and has evolved into another layer of abstract graphic structure. This design not only maintains the unity of the overall space, but also gives each part an independent expressiveness.



Analysis of black, white and gray graphics on the right side wall of the vault ceiling of the main room of Cave 11 of Kizilgaha Grottoes

Before starting the formal imitation, it is necessary to first clarify the graphic characteristics of the imitation picture and analyze the relationship between the graphic brightness - black, white and gray. Due to the 11th cave of Kizilgaha Grottoes, the top of the mural is more damaged, the author summarizes the exposed sandstone layer and the soil layer as gray, and summarizes the blue-green color in the cave as a large area of gray, thus forming a graphic structure with gray as the main tone.



Layer superposition imitation step diagram

Ancient painters used plane graphics as the basis and combined sandstone layers, soil layers and mineral color layers organically through three-dimensional superposition techniques. This multi-layered construction method not only shows the natural beauty of rock color materials, but also forms a unique visual rhythm, which can be regarded as a wonderful work in the history of ancient art.

1.2 Material color: less is more

The Qiuci murals are mainly green, and no more than six or seven colors are used. From the source of pigments, except for blue lapis lazuli, other pigments are mostly taken from local natural resources. Archaeologists found artificial green ore crystals left over from ancient smelting in the Subashi ruins of the Tang Dynasty Buddhist Temple. This discovery confirms that the green pigments used in Qiuci murals are likely to be produced locally. It can also be seen from the investigation that the pigments used in ancient murals are mainly contained in the rock layers of nearby mountains and the riverbeds of the earth.

The Kizilgaha Grottoes are located in a desert with few people. They were excavated in the 6th century AD and have not been open to the public yet. Although the murals in Kizilgaha show a typical Qiuci artistic style, they are significantly different from the diamond patterns and blue-green tones of the Kizil murals more than 70 kilometers away. This is a cave built by nobles, with unique colors. The murals show elegant “silver gray” and “high brightness”, which is very beautiful.

In the process of copying the murals, the author used international color paper and collected sand and soil in the cave to compare the color and material relationship of the murals, and analyzed that the color materials of the copied parts are mainly yellow sand, loess, gray soil, stone green, etc. On the basis of the black, white and gray relationship, the relationship between the level and color of the murals is analyzed, and a material archive board is made. On the one hand, it is to record the materials used for the mural copying and restore the essential colors of colored sandstone, colored soil, and colored minerals; on the other hand, it is to present the layer superposition and quantitative relationship of Qiuci murals, abstractly summarize the copied murals, and form a real archive of the language elements and grammatical structure of Qiuci murals.



Quantitative analysis of layers and colors

1.3 Local materials, one body and land

Through the investigation and comparison of the Qiuci Grottoes, it can be found that the painting methods of the murals in the caves and the sandstone mountains outside the caves are exactly the same in “quality” and “structure”. In Cave 11 of Kizilgaha Grottoes, in addition to the coarse sandstone layer, the fine sandstone layer presents different colors. At the beginning of the imitation, the author conducted an experimental exploration of the presentation of the sandstone mountain, and analyzed and sorted out the overlapping relationship between the “coarse sandstone layer” and “fine sandstone layer” of the mural carrier, as well as between fine sandstone layers of different colors.



Material experiment

Walking on the land of western China, the rock layers around you and the land under your feet are all rock colors. Collecting colored sandstone and colored soil of local geology in nature, and using the original “rock color material” for imitation and creation, this is not only a simple expansion of the types and forms of “painting pigments”, but also a return of “painting pigments” to its “essential attributes”: earth rock layers, local representatives. Thus, I realized the “qualitative thinking” and “material aesthetics” of artistic creation, as well as the “local value” of artistic works.

2. Summary of the copying of Qiuci murals

Rock color guides people to walk out of the city and return to the embrace of nature. In the process of collecting on the earth, the author re-recognized the geological characteristics of Xinjiang and understood the importance of using local materials to create contemporary art works of “body and land are one”. While feeling the “loess civilization” nurtured by the land of China, I can’t help but sigh at the profoundness and breadth of Chinese culture, as well as the inheritance and innovative spirit of contemporary Chinese painting art with broad creative space.

The experience of copying Qiuci murals has enabled the author to observe, think, and copy beyond the local painting level, and expand the vision to the grand local geological characteristics. The content of mural copying and formal analysis has also expanded from the traditional “surface image painting method and style” to “the structural relationship between sandstone mountain and mural language”.

Notes

“Kucha Facing the Wall” is one of the important courses in the Yancai painting course system. It was implemented by the Yancai Painting Creation Advanced Research Class of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 2015, and teaching exhibitions were held at the Central Academy of Fine Arts and Hubei Academy of Fine Arts. In 2018, the Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts and the Kucha Institute jointly held the “Kucha Facing the Wall” course again, and invited Xu Yongming, the dean of the Kucha Institute, as the guiding professor. In 2021, the Yancai Painting Studio of the Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts, the Xinjiang Kizil Institute, and the Yancai Art Society jointly held a 30-day “Kucha Facing the Wall - Mural Copying” tripartite joint teaching, with Hu Mingzhe as the academic host.

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