

ACM

敦煌 SACRED CAVES

DUNHUANG, BUDDHISM, AND THE SILK ROAD

FIELD
NOTES

THE
GREAT



DUN HUANG EXPEDITION

Suitable
for ages
13 & up

Step into the shoes of an archaeologist

STEP INTO THE SHOES OF an Archaeologist!

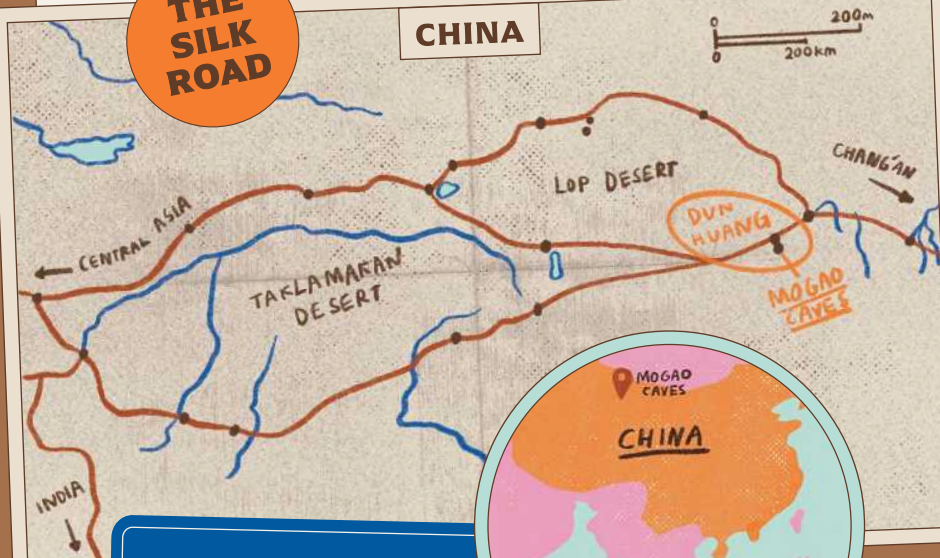
The Mogao Caves in Dunhuang represent one of the world's largest, oldest, and best-preserved Buddhist art sites.

They survive today thanks to archaeologists and conservators who study and preserve them for future generations.

**THE
SILK
ROAD**

CHINA

0 200m
0 200km



As you explore this exhibition, step into the shoes of an archaeologist and learn to piece together clues from the past!

EXPEDITION PROTOCOLS



MISSION

Follow the trail markers on the map to each station.
Document your findings at every station (pencils only, please).



BONUS MISSION

Look for special stamping stations along the way for a bonus mission!



BONUS MISSION

Build Your Dunhuang Palette

Artists in ancient Dunhuang created brilliant paints from precious and rare minerals. As you explore the exhibition, your mission is to collect amazing colours just like they did!

HOW TO COLLECT COLOURS

STEP 1

Locate the stamping stations around the museum. Use your gallery map to help you.



STEP 2

Pick up a stamp card and collect all six stamps to reveal an illustration of Nava the Nine-Coloured Deer.

STEP 3

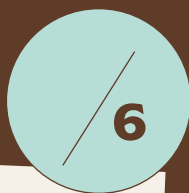
That's not all! Hold your magic brush near the scanner at each station to add colours to your digital palette.



STEP 4

Once you've collected all six stamps and colours, head to the Lobby on Level 1 to continue your journey.

**TOTAL COLOURS
COLLECTED:**



	☐
	☐
	☐
	☐
	☐
	☐

MISSION 01

Caves & Colours

Your first mission is to head to the Level 2 Foyer to learn how the Mogao Caves were decorated.



Take a closer look at the mineral pigments on display to discover the colours used by painters to create the beautiful cave murals at Mogao.

Ancient artists were like chemists — they crushed stones, ground minerals, and mixed secret recipes to create colours that have lasted over 1,000 years. Their "paint box" was the natural world!



INVESTIGATE

Match each mineral to the colour it produces:

MALACHITE •



ORPIMENT •



CINNABAR •



REALGAR •



AZURITE •



Head to Cave 158 nearby and look at the different colours and pigments used there. As you explore, observe the condition of the different colours. Which pigments have faded over time and which are still vibrant?

DIG DEEPER

Some pigments were made from local resources, while others were made from materials that travelled incredible distances.

Can you guess which colours were the most expensive?

Don't forget to collect these colours and try grinding minerals at the Cave of Colours (Level 1, Lobby) before you leave today!



Buddha teaching

Gandhara, 3rd or 4th century
Schist
Gift of the Kwan Im
Thong Hood Cho Temple
2015-00472



The Buddha gains enlightenment

Nepal, 13th century
Copper alloy
2013-00582



Seated Buddha

Thailand, 19th or early 20th century
Metal, lacquer, glass, gold leaf, mother-of-pearl
Gift of Mr Toh Soon Huat
2011-01561

DIG DEEPER

Why do you think different regions developed their own ways of depicting the Buddha? What does this tell us about how ideas change as they travel?

 MISSION 03

Dunhuang and the Silk Road: Where Worlds Collide

Observe the three hares on this ceiling mural and count the ears carefully. There are only three ears between them... yet each hare appears to have two! This clever optical illusion has fascinated explorers and visitors for many years.

The earliest known depiction of this symbol appears in the Mogao Caves. It has since been discovered by researchers in completely unexpected places across the world.



Ceiling painting with three hares
Cave 407, Sui dynasty (581–618)
Duan Wenjie and Li Fu, 1954
Pigment on paper
L01992

INVESTIGATE

The three hares appear on a wide range of objects — from glassware and ceramics to coins, textiles, and architecture.

Use the decoder key below to crack the code and discover how far this remarkable symbol travelled.

DECODER KEY

A	C	D	E	F	G	I	L	M	N	R	Y

1

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

--	--	--	--	--	--	--

2

--	--	--	--	--	--	--

--	--	--	--	--	--	--

3

--	--	--	--

--	--	--	--

4

--	--	--	--	--	--

--	--	--	--	--	--



DIG DEEPER

What does the spread of this motif reveal about Dunhuang's role along the Silk Road?

📍 MISSION 04

Linmo: Copying to Learn & Preserve

How do we preserve 1500-year-old murals painted on fragile cave walls in the desert? The answer lies in an ancient Chinese practice called *linmo* — the art of careful copying.

In the 20th century, artists and researchers copied the murals by hand to study and preserve their likeness. These “copy” paintings also introduced Dunhuang to the world, and many painters became famous artists themselves. The murals in replica Cave 249 were recreated entirely by hand.



The artist Zhang Daqian (right) in Dunhuang.
Lo Archive images
© Trustees of Princeton University

DID YOU KNOW?

Today, researchers continue this tradition using digital methods, scanning the murals at extremely high-resolution and sharing them through online platforms and digitally-reproduced cave replicas.

Step 1: Close observation

Pick a mural from Cave 249 and study it for 3 minutes. Notice its colours, composition, and other surprising details.

Step 2: Copy to preserve

In the space below, try copying a small section of the mural. As you work, think about:



Cave 249
Western Wei dynasty (535-556)

What aspects were straightforward to reproduce?
Which proved challenging?
What details did the copying process reveal that visual observation alone missed?



DIG DEEPER

Examine the *linmo* paintings displayed throughout the exhibition. Based on your hands-on experience, what technical skills and knowledge do you think a *linmo* artist requires?



📍 MISSION 05

Saving Dunhuang

Preserving the Mogao Caves is a constant battle against nature. Sandstorms threaten to bury cave entrances. Salt crystals cause pigments and plaster to flake. Earthquakes can crack fragile sculptures and damage the caves. Yet these treasures survive thanks to dedicated conservators and other experts who work to protect them.

INVESTIGATE

Conduct a condition survey of Cave 45 and document the types of deterioration you observe:



Cave 45
Tang dynasty, 705–780

CHECKLIST



- ☐ Faded colours
- ☐ Cracks & Losses
- ☐ Flaking Paint
- ☐ Vandalism

If you had to prioritise saving ONE area first,
which would you choose and why?



DIG DEEPER

What is the greatest challenge in preserving the caves:
temperature changes, sandstorms, or human visitors?

📍 MISSION 06

Portraits from the Past

You may have noticed portraits throughout the caves. These are donors who commissioned or supported the creation of the caves. They include merchants, rulers, officials, monks, and entire families.

The paintings provide important documentation of how people dressed, styled their hair, and presented themselves across different periods in history. Each portrait offers a glimpse into the lives and customs of people in Dunhuang and along the Silk Road.



**Donor portrait of the monks
Cihui, Fayan, and Huijing**
Cave 346, Five Dynasties
(907–960), Guiyijun period
Wan Gengyu, 1960
Pigment on paper
L01112



Donor portrait of Cao family women
Cave 61, Five Dynasties,
Guiyijun period, 947–951
Feng Zhongnian and Wan Gengyu, 1955
Pigment on paper
L02014



Donor portrait of Lady Wang of Taiyuan
Cave 130, Tang dynasty, 705–780
Duan Wenjie, 1959
Pigment on paper
L02000



INVESTIGATE

Look for these clothes and accessories in the donor portraits throughout the exhibition. When you spot each item, tick the box and note who it belongs to.

☐☐☐☐☐

DIG DEEPER

Some donor portraits are larger than others and are placed more prominently in the cave. What might this tell us about the importance or status of these donors?

Expedition's End

Congratulations! You've successfully completed your expedition at Dunhuang. But remember, your work here is just the beginning. Archaeologists and conservators continue this vital research every day, racing against time to study and preserve the caves for future generations.

What would we lose if places like the Mogao Caves disappeared forever? Share your reflections below:



DIG DEEPER

If you were to preserve one important site in Singapore for future generations, which would you choose and why?



We hope the skills you've learned today will help you appreciate and protect the treasures that surround us all.
See you for our next adventure at ACM!

敦煌 SACRED CAVES

DUNHUANG, BUDDHISM, AND THE SILK ROAD

Exhibition organised by the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore and the Dunhuang Academy, China



敦煌研究院
DUNHUANG ACADEMY

ACM is an institution of

Supported by



National
Heritage
Board



Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth

Lead Patron



KWAN IM THONG HOOD CHO TEMPLE

Principal Presenter

Strategic Principal

THE FULLERTON HERITAGE
SINGAPORE

THE FULLERTON
HOTELS AND RESORTS



中國銀行
BANK OF CHINA

Key Partners

Community and Engagement Partner

吴学光 (WU HSIOW KWANG)



The Robert H. N. Ho
Family Foundation Global



汇流
THE CONFLUENCE CIRCLE

Major & Supporting Benefactors



Gong Hao Fund



LWC Charity Fund
利心慈善基金



PAEONIA
FOUNDATION

MS IDA MH CHOW



NOTES:

NEW GOALS

FIELD
NOTESTASKS
ON HAND

IMPORTANT

HIGH PRIORITY

EXPEDITION
LOG

REST DAY

TO
DO

THIS WEEK

S
M
T
W
T
F
S

STUFF TO DO

BUSY
EXPLORING,
CALL BACK
LATER

WEEKLY



SNAPSHOT

OUT OF
OFFICEDON'T
FORGET:TOP
SECRET!IDEAS &
OBSERVATIONS

READY TO ROAM

