

UIGHUR ART

In contrast to the Gök Türk, there is virtually no Uighur sculpture to discuss, but numerous examples of Uighur pictorial art in the form of murals and manuscript illustrations. This may be due to the fact that the Uighur became adherents of two major religions that both had a rich tradition of religious painting – Manichaeism and Buddhism.

The majority of the surviving Uighur paintings are frescoes in cave shrines depicting scenes of the Buddha and the donors who contributed to the construction and decoration of the caves. The most famous of these is the Bezeklik Thousand Buddha Caves near Qocho. Constructed between the 5th and 14th centuries, the 77 individual caves contain numerous depictions of the Buddha executed in styles ranging from relatively naïve to highly complex. Stylistically, the paintings are eclectic, displaying strong Iranian and Chinese influence as well as some Indian influence to a much lesser degree.

Depictions of the donors are particularly valuable for the information they provide on the appearance, dress and, sometimes, the ethnic origin of the donors. Uighur nobles, both men and women, are depicted among the donors in some scenes, while in other paintings Sogdians are shown among the donors. In addition to information about people, the murals occasionally provide some details on Uighur architecture.



(L) An Uighur prince, Bezeklik Caves 8th-9th c. – (R) Uighur Princess, Bezeklik Caves, 9th-12th c. (Wikicommons)

The other major source of Uighur art is manuscript illustrations. Numerous illustrated Uighur texts, primarily Buddhist and Manichaeian, were discovered at Turfan and Dunhuang. They reveal a sophisticated tradition of manuscript illustration, and, like the cave murals, provide information on religious practices as well as the dress and appearance of religious leaders. The Manichaeian texts are particularly valuable in this regard due to the limited surviving sources of information about Manichaeism.



Fragment of a 10th century Manichaeian text (Wikicommons)

Readings

Golden, Peter. *Central Asia in World History*, Oxford, 2011.

Sinor, Denis and Klyashtorny, S. G. "The Turk Empire", in Harmatta, János et al. *History of civilizations of Central Asia*, Vol 3. Paris, 1994, pp. 327-347.

Sinor, Denis, Geng Shimin and Kychanov, Y. I. "The Uighurs, the Kyrgyz and the Tangut (Eighth to the Thirteenth Century)", in Harmatta, János et al. *History of civilizations of Central Asia*, Vol 4, Part 1. Paris, 1998, pp. 191-214.

Sinor, Denis (ed.). *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*. Cambridge, 1990.

Discussion Questions

1. Why did the Uighurs produce more art than the Gök Türks?
2. What were the stylistic influences on Uighur art?
3. What is the historical value of Uighur art?