

The Artistic Heritage of the Khitan: A Study of Composition and Characteristics of Representation

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Abstract

In the 10th to 11th centuries, the Khitan (also known as the Liao Dynasty) was established just before the formation of the Mongol Empire, known as "Liao Shi" and "Qidan Guozhi." The Mongol-speaking people emerged on the historical stage and existed for about 200 years.

Due to their extensive cultural interactions with China, Korea, and Central Asian countries, the Khitan developed high-level artistic achievements, creating innovative architectural complexes, monuments, paintings, and first created the type of relief printing.

Khitan artists reflected the artistic achievements of neighboring countries while integrating them with the characteristics of traditional art representation, resulting in unique and innovative works that showcased their distinctive identity.

When observing the artistic features of Khitan painting, although there were influences from common painting styles widespread in Central Asian countries, Buddhist religious art, and Uyghur and Chinese painting, the traditional representations of nomadic peoples predominantly developed.

The characteristic of the art and decorative works of the Khitan Empire formed the fundamental basis for the emergence and establishment of "traditional Mongolian painting" in the early 20th century.

Keywords: Wall Paintings, Foundational Paintings, Burial Ritual Paintings, (Portraits, Everyday Life, Four Seasons).

1. Introduction

Main Part: Khitan painting can be categorized into temple wall paintings, foundational paintings, and burial ritual paintings.

Temple Wall Paintings: The Buddhist-themed sculptures and decorative paintings created as part of the architectural ensemble of the Khitan Empire are considered to be a unique cultural heritage that reflects the intertwined settled and nomadic lifestyles of these people, as highlighted by scholars in their works.

According to **Professor N. Tsultem**, "From the wall paintings of the temple found in the White Stupa of Inner Mongolia and several archaeological sites of the Khitan in Mongolia, the most significant is the city of Kherlen Bars" [1-3]. Russian scholar L.A. Yevtukhova stated, "From the remnants of a temple beneath the floor of the famous palace of Khan Ogedei (Tumen Amgalan), fragments of wall paintings were discovered, which can be studied as clear examples of Uyghur and Central Asian art from the IX-X

centuries" [4]. Researchers have also considered the famous Shanhua Temple complex in Shanxi Province, as well as the Sakyamuni Pagoda (established in 1056) and the wall paintings inside the tombs related to the Liao Dynasty in Datong, Shanxi Province, to be clear examples reflecting the characteristics of Khitan art.

Specifically, Inner Mongolian art researcher L. Khashtuya wrote, "The wall paintings of the two tombs in Datong city, Shanxi Province, depict interesting scenes from the daily life of the Khitan people. One feature of this historic site is that all four walls and the dome of the tomb are completely filled with paintings" [5].

The ritual-themed paintings on wooden panels inside the burial tomb depict the last visions that may arise in a person's mind at the moment of transitioning from this world. Specifically, a commonly seen phenomenon in burial rituals is the depiction of a saddle horse led by a servant, which illustrates this concept. This is exemplified

by the painting titled “A Khitan Man with a Horse” on the wall of the Khitan tomb in the White Stupa of Wuhai (Aohai Banner) in Inner Mongolia [6]. The image of a man leading a horse, along with the presence of another person, likely serves as the last portrayal of the life of the deceased before transitioning to another realm.

On another wall inside the tomb, five female figures are depicted holding trays with food and fruits, standing behind a table set with various utensils and offerings. Thus, the paintings on the tomb walls narrate various events occurring in the domestic environment.

Additionally, the depiction of various household items on the burial slab reflects the intention to associate mundane life events. Moreover, on either side of the entrance to the temple, male and female guardians are illustrated. A closer examination of this image reveals that around them are various symbolic patterns and items characteristic of Buddhist rituals. Often, motifs such as Garuda birds and rhinoceros horns are depicted in conjunction with elements like fire and clouds. Placing these images near the entrance of the tomb indicates that each pattern and specific depiction serves the purpose of warding off evil spirits and protecting against malevolent forces through rituals, spells, or symbolic meanings inherent in these images.

The Khitan artist Hu Gui’s painting titled “Migration,” stored in the “Palace Museum” in Beijing, also illustrates commonplace scenes of ordinary life, as seen in the wall paintings of the Khitan tomb in the White Stupa of Wuhai in Inner Mongolia. The painting incorporates various events, such as a camel caravan carrying a load, horses in the countryside, and a Khitan man standing holding the reins of his horse, all depicted within a single composition.

Researchers have also noted that “during the Khitan Dynasty (10th-11th centuries), painting developed significantly compared to previous periods, evolving into various forms, including historical events, portraits of notable figures, and decorative art” [7].

The Khitan nobility supported and promoted arts and culture, establishing musical and dance ensembles, workshops for creating visual art, constructing monumental architecture, and building many temples and pagodas. The Khitan rulers and aristocrats honored talented artists, valuing and preserving their artworks, which has allowed us to trace the unique characteristics of masterpieces created in ancient times. In this regard, a prominent artist named Ye-Liu-Niao-Li is highlighted, with researchers suggesting, “The sixth Khitan king, Shin Zun (also known by his true name Liao Su), was a prominent artist, which is why a significant number of paintings were specially created in his tomb” [5].

Based on the writings of scholars and researchers, it is evident that the Khitan kings and nobles implemented policies to cultivate professional painters and artisans and develop the art of representation.

2. The Images on the Wooden Panels of the Tomb

The Mongolian tradition of depicting winged horses and deer

soaring under a cloud-filled sky is deeply rooted in folklore, epics, and oral literature. The thought process of envisioning wings or appendages has been passed down in Mongolian culture since ancient times, as evidenced by rock carvings and steles adorned with images of animals. The practice of exaggerating the depiction of animals and abstractly interpreting them has evolved within the art and culture of ancient states and empires.

In particular, the ‘Crane Depiction’ from the M-1 tomb associated with the Liaoyi period in Datong, Shanxi Province, features a spatially complex representation rendered through line abstraction. This example can be seen in the painting known as the ‘Kitan Nomadic Palace’ from the Song Dynasty.

Another image within the tomb evokes bronze utensils placed on a banquet table, illustrating the ritual of parting performed with a guide, showcasing the farewell ceremony for the final journey. The composition and representation of these series of images appear to be simple and simplified.

Behind the table and platform railing depicted according to the principle of abstraction, several crane birds are illustrated on the wall. The depiction of crane birds has been inherited since the Han Dynasty and may represent the imperial power of the emperor. Additionally, it is likely that the upper nobility of the Kitan Empire revered the image of the crane as a symbol of immortality and eternity. The images on the outer side of the wooden coffin likely resonate in style and content with the patterns painted on the tomb's walls, suggesting that they might depict the deceased amidst unfolding events.

Additionally, in the wall paintings, there is an emphasis on portraying the physical appearance and actions of individuals while also reflecting their internal emotional states.

It can be concluded that the artist may depict a welcoming ceremony after the soul has found itself in the afterlife. On the walls and door frames, various linear motifs, such as spiral patterns, flourishing decorations, straight designs, patterns of animals, intricate designs, ornamental patterns, water wave motifs, numerical motifs, coin motifs, and abstract representations of creatures are creatively integrated in appropriate places. The paintings that illustrate the four seasons in conjunction with the daily activities of people feature simple yet concise narratives, while skillfully intertwining the symbolic meanings of the illustrations, which becomes a key characteristic of the wall paintings in tombs. Researchers have noted that “the wall paintings in Khitan tombs serve as a valuable historical source, clearly reflecting the history, culture, customs, and artistic development of the nomadic peoples of Eurasia, acting as an encyclopedia for understanding the cultural heritage of this ethnic group in the steppe” [6].

In addition to the customs of the Khitan Empire, the study of the rituals and traditions of ancient states that existed in Mongolia sheds light on the distinctive qualities of artistic creations through the thematic narratives depicted on tomb walls, with engaging

images, motifs, and depictions of animals, reflecting the unique mindset and artistic preferences of these people.

3. Foundational Painting

In traditional foundational paintings /scroll paintings/ created by Chinese artists, human figures and events are depicted realistically and convincingly. Professor N. Tsultem has pointed out that "in the paintings of the Khitan and the Zhiros, there is certainly an influence from Tang dynasty paintings in several aspects of cultural art; however, in terms of themes and content, images showing the livelihood, hunting activities, and horsemen of the nomadic peoples of northern Asia are more prominent" [1-3].

In the thematic image, various interesting subjects are depicted, including farmers engaged in agriculture, herdsman tending to their livestock, mounted hunters, hunters gathered in the open fields, and a group of nobles discussing work at a gathering, along with princes and lords who are going out to enjoy the countryside. The Khitans are referred to as a "horse-riding people," and since the time they began to domesticate horses for grazing, this became a central motif in their traditional art, clearly evident in the illustrations on the canvas. Khitan artists portrayed life's events realistically, capturing human figures convincingly and representing each scenario clearly.

As nomads, the importance of livestock as a daily necessity is reflected significantly in the works of the artists, demonstrating that livestock has been an essential element in the lives of those who have historically grazed their herds across the vast steppe and mountainous terrains. The Khitans are often characterized as a "horse-riding people," and this motif has been prominent in their traditional art since they began domesticating horses, as seen vividly in their paintings.

When observing the general representations of foundational paintings, it is noted that the figures were arranged in a scale relationship to create a sense of space. Studies of the figures, clothing, and artifacts in Khitan paintings reveal that elements of the clothing culture of ancient nomadic peoples were preserved and continued alongside some innovations and changes. Specifically, the headpieces and clothing styles of officials, women, and servants in the Chinese aristocracy have been incorporated into the attire depicted in Khitan dynasty paintings.

However, the depiction of patterns woven intentionally into the robes and garments shows distinct features that do not resemble northern designs. The Khitan nobility not only avoided using northern textile patterns but also adorned and enriched their garments with their own developed patterns. The designed symbolic patterns and images, as well as the specific meaningful depictions on the lapels, shoulders, and hems of the royal robes, can be seen in the portraits of kings and queens.

Scholar N. Tsultem noted, "Li San-Hua, the eldest son of Taizu Alekey, the founder of the Khitan state, was skilled at painting portraits of Northern aristocrats and tribal leaders, as well as

horses. His painting titled "The Hunter on Horseback" depicts an elderly noble standing before his horse wearing a robe with a round upright collar, a long skirt with hems that meet at the center, and a white leather waistcoat wrapped around his waist adorned with a decorative belt, along with long-tipped boots. This description closely aligns with the clothing of the Khitan people mentioned on page 56 of historical works related to the Liao dynasty while participating in hunting, which indicates they wore fur waistcoats." Furthermore, the composition of the painting titled "The Son of the Liao Dynasty's Taizu" by Yelu Pei, dated to the IX-X centuries, also clearly illustrates these features in its design.

Professor B. Bayartur stated, "The portraits of the emperors and empresses of the Yuan dynasty can be seen as a continuation of the portraits of the nobility of the ancient Khitan state, as they are depicted with fine lines capturing the features of their faces, eyes, and noses, aiming to reveal not only the external characteristics of the individuals but also their internal psyche, behavior, and beliefs" [8].

In the paintings that preserve the colors and representations of Khitan art, there is no use of the method of modeling forms into physical reality through shading, which is typical in Western painting when capturing seasonal colors and atmospheric environments. Furthermore, the color and representation characteristics of paintings from the Khitan dynasty starkly differ from the traditional Chinese "gohua" painting style, which often follows a singular color theme. Instead, they produced artworks that were simple and straightforward, in contrast to the intricate styles typical of Song dynasty painting. This can be seen in paintings like "Khitan Family," works from the Southern Song dynasty, and in the murals depicting Khitans playing "polo," as well as images from the tombs related to the Wuhai region of Inner Mongolia and the Aohai Liao period.

Khitan painting prominently features themes of the daily lives of citizens, celebrations, and various ceremonial subjects. Notably, a common occurrence in Khitan funerary culture is the image of a saddle horse led by a servant, likely related to the theme of the deceased transitioning to another world.

While the influence of Tang dynasty painting is evident in the works of Khitan artists, the themes and content predominantly focus on the daily lives of the nomadic peoples of Northern Asia, depicting scenes of hunting, horseback riders, camel caravans, warriors hunting, aristocrats enjoying leisure time, herders watering their livestock, as well as queens and embroiderers engaged in various activities.

In one painting titled "Khitan Horseman," the artist skillfully portrays a warrior highly valuing the horses he has bred and raised, creating an impression of deep admiration for his steeds.

The Kitan artist accentuated certain focal areas of the painting by slightly embossing the forms and depicting objects prominently with dark brown lines. Additionally, in the Kitan-themed

paintings, the movements of humans and animals are illustrated with energy, bringing life to the unfolding events, which becomes a distinguishing feature of their art.

Portraits: Professor N. Tsultem noted that during the 10th to 11th centuries of the Khitan dynasty, there existed portrait paintings, thematic images, and wall paintings in tombs. He mentioned that “cultural interactions expanded with foreign nations such as the Nan Chao, Tibet, Gulong, and Jagar, resulting in the exchange of images of deities, portraits, and scriptures” as referenced in “The Sacred Texts of the Liao Dynasty, Book 1, Volume 6, p. 68” (Tsultem N., 1971, p. 43).

Furthermore, it is stated that “a study by Professor Ichizo Tamura and Yukio Hawaiishi from Kyoto University in 1932 examined three tombs of Khitan kings (1023-1035) near the White Stupa in the Baarin region of Inner Mongolia, and detailed findings were published in 1953.” The records indicate in the Dornod burial temple, there is a portrait that depicts the ceremonial state of over 70 identifiable people, including officials in traditional clothing, military leaders, and common citizens. Additionally, it highlights that ‘the landscapes of Eastern Mongolia, including the fauna and birds, were illustrated to represent the four seasons of the year’ (Tsultem N., 1971, p. 44).

From Khitan paintings, one can clearly observe the general appearance and lifestyle of people from that era. Professor N.V. Khrypunov noted that “...the Khitans, as we speculate, certainly have a common origin with the Mongolian ‘superethnos.’ This idea is evident in the clothing, adornments, and other artifacts depicted in portraiture.” Russian scholar M.V. Gorlik stated, “The round-collared Khitan robe resembles the garments worn by Song dynasty warriors during battles; it is lightweight and suitable for combat... The robe features a round upright collar, a central fastened placket, and a long skirt that hangs down to the shins, and it was widely spread during the Liao dynasty... Even the emperor often wore this style of robe” [9]. The aspirations of the nobility in this regard may not only reflect a desire to appear elegant and refined but also indicate a wish to display the dignity of Khitan nobility within the regional context.

Researchers also noted, “The Khitans had a tradition of wearing a shirt under their robes... Such shirts could have vertical or diagonal plackets, long sleeves, and were made of plain fabric or silk” [6].

Russian scientist A.L. Ivliev noted that ‘the Kidan people celebrated the Dongnu ceremony on the New Year's Day during the afternoon at the noble court, where the king was presented with a dress adorned with leaves’ [10]. In the ceremonial-themed painting, the scene of the king receiving valuable silk belts and other gifts is prominently featured.

It appears that it was quite common for Khitan nobility to commission paintings depicting festive celebrations, state honors, and palace life. The prevalence of such themed paintings indicates that the Khitan nobility and officials often favored the

commissioning of celebratory artwork.

The portraits created by Khitan artists feature realistic representations and simple freehand styles, showcasing a clear distinction from Chinese Song dynasty paintings and the Buddhist portraits painted by Uyghur artists. Additionally, the color and representational characteristics of these thematic paintings seem to stand out more compared to traditional Chinese art, which often emphasizes a single dominant color. Scholars have noted that “... in the period preceding the establishment of the Mongol Empire, there was indeed some influence from the Khitan paintings and schools of art from the Khitan Song and Tang dynasties,” establishing that the arts and culture of the Khitan, a major Central Asian empire prior to the rise of the Mongol state, can also be recognized alongside the cultural elements in other regions” [7].

Professor B. Bayartur elaborated that “the portraits of emperors and empresses of the Yuan dynasty can be seen as a continuation of the portraits of the nobility of the ancient Khitan state, as they are depicted with fine lines detailing their features, such as faces, eyes, and noses, aiming to reflect not only the external characteristics of individuals but also their internal psyche, behavior, and beliefs” [8]. However, it is observed that while the above paintings do not strive for realistic seasonal colors akin to Western art, Khitan artists had established methods of painting events with a limited palette of colors on a backdrop of yellowish-brown, regardless of the seasonal conditions.

According to Russian scholar E.V. Zavadskaya in her work "Aesthetic Issues in Ancient Chinese Painting," it is believed that "six fundamental principles governed the academic style of ancient Chinese painting, particularly within the Dao School." These principles include: expressing the rhythm of life and movement, the technique of brushwork, the methodology of depicting objects, using color to paint the subject realistically, integrating the central composition with related events, and the notion that when an artist creates a work, they should not only elevate their thoughts but also creatively incorporate the distinct features of previous renowned artists' works; such adherence leads to the creation of a truly perfect artistic masterpiece.

This trend in ancient Chinese painting was also followed by the Kitan people. In the East, there was a prevailing notion that 'Art is a reflection of society, and only the social psyche can reveal the essence of art' (Zavadskaya E.V., 1975), which is evident in the works of Kitan artists [11]. The artists believed that when the visual forms and narrative actions are harmoniously and convincingly integrated, they can create a work that evokes active movement and a lively, fresh sensation. To develop this fundamental principle, Kitan artists creatively incorporated the artistic features of previous generations' works while strictly adhering to elegant painting techniques.

In the compositions and depictions of Khitan artists, the emphasis is primarily on realistic representation; however, in certain sections, there is a noticeable preference for artistic refinement, showcasing

interesting spatial variations and emphasizing the free strokes of the brush. This approach indicates that the meaning and content of the artwork become clearer and more dynamic, as evident from the overall design solutions of the paintings.

While Khitan artists prioritize realistic representation, their judicious creative decisions in some areas lead to greater artistic freedom, thereby enhancing the liveliness and depth of their works to reach a higher artistic level.

4. Conclusion

The painting of the Khitan dynasty evolved into fundamental genres, including wall paintings, foundational paintings (scroll paintings), and ritualistic burial paintings. The wall paintings inside temples and pagodas had themes and content that differed significantly from Tibetan Buddhist images and Sogdian wall paintings, displaying simpler representations. Additionally, while Uyghur wall paintings prominently feature decorative patterns, Khitan art appears to prioritize simplicity, ordinary designs, and representations.

In their foundational paintings on themes of daily life, Khitan artists sought to achieve realistic and persuasive portrayals of existence through effective composition, integration of representations, and harmonious color schemes. By skillfully executing their brushwork with a lyrical approach, they adhered to the principle that “an active and vibrant feeling will emerge when the artwork is effectively executed.”

The subjects depicted in Khitan paintings predominantly include the daily lives of common people, hunting scenes, gatherings of soldiers, as well as events within the courts and among the aristocracy.

Khitan paintings, characterized by their straightforward narratives and loosely rendered figures against muted backgrounds, had a significant influence on the art of the Yuan dynasty in the Middle Ages, as evidenced by the compositional solutions of the paintings created by artists at the court of Kublai Khan. Furthermore, in the early 20th century, as traditional Mongolian painting branched

out into themes of daily life, the unique artistic solutions found in Khitan art played an important role in this development.

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APPENDIX IMAGE:



Mural /wall painting/ on the northern wall of the tomb related to the Liao Dynasty in Datong City, Shanxi Province, China.

Mural of the tomb related to the Liao Dynasty in Datong City, Shanxi Province, China. The painting features male and female guardian figures; five servants wearing Khitan robes, Chinese hats,

and shoes, along with a variety of decorative motifs and symbolic representations on the eastern wall." /L. Khashtuya. From research documentation/





Mural on the western wall of the tomb related to the Liao Dynasty in Datong City, Shanxi Province, and the “Crane depiction” from Tomb M1

The painting 'Dongdan Wang Exiting' by Khitan artist Yelü Bei features a diverse array of unique representations, including people's clothing, hats and crowns, decorations, and body movements. This artwork is considered to have significant research value and is housed in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, USA



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