

Article

Rethinking Dialogues: Human, Material, and Technology in Contemporary Curatorship

Yixuan Cheng^{1*}

¹ Art and Art professions (Studio Art), Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, New York University, New York, United States; yc8234@nyu.edu

* Correspondence: yc8234@nyu.edu

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Abstract: In recent years, museums and contemporary art institutions have increasingly turned to exhibitions framed as “dialogues between the past and the present.” Although often presented as innovative, this curatorial strategy has also drawn criticism for encouraging superficial juxtapositions that aestheticize or strip historical objects of their original contexts. Focusing on *Staging Dunhuang*, the inaugural exhibition of the Dunhuang Contemporary Art Museum in Shanghai, this paper examines how dialogic curatorship can move beyond such limitations in practice. Grounded in curatorial theory and material culture studies, and informed by qualitative analysis and first-hand institutional observation, the paper analyzes how the exhibition brings together spatial design, material choices, sensory experience, and technological mediation to shape visitors’ encounters with time. Organized into four sections including History, Nature, Representation, and Mindscape, *Staging Dunhuang* gradually shifts from historically anchored displays toward more subjective contemporary interpretations. Practices such as artifact replication, scent-based installations, material transformation, and affective artistic responses contribute to an exhibition environment in which historical, ritual, and contemporary temporalities overlap. Rather than treating dialogue as a matter of simple juxtaposition, this paper suggests that meaningful curatorial exchange depends on the careful staging of encounters that engage visitors bodily and reflectively. By keeping unresolved the tension between historical specificity and contemporary imagination, *Staging Dunhuang* serves as a compelling case for reconsidering how cultural heritage can be engaged responsibly and creatively within today’s hybrid museum and gallery spaces.

Keywords: Dialogic curatorship; Multi-temporality; Materiality; Sensory engagement; Dunhuang

1. Introduction

In recent years, museums and art galleries worldwide have increasingly adopted exhibitions framed as “dialogues between the past and the present,” in which historical artifacts are placed in relation to contemporary artworks. This practice moves beyond a traditional linear historical narrative and instead seeks to prompt audiences to reconsider cultural heritage through contemporary perspectives by staging encounters, tensions, and integrations across different temporal and spatial contexts. Despite their prevalence, however, the significance and effectiveness of this curatorial approach remain contested within scholarly debates in museology and curatorial studies.

A prominent critique of so-called “dialogue exhibitions” concerns their tendency toward superficiality. For example, Alice Stevenson critically observes that while such exhibitions are often presented as “fresh” and “innovative,” the inclusion of contemporary artworks rarely

results in a substantive reconfiguration of how the past is understood (Stevenson, 2024, p.99). In such cases, contemporary art risks functioning as an illustrative supplement rather than as a genuine interlocutor, thereby undermining the premise of dialogue itself. In contrast, other scholars have sought to examine whether more sustained and reflective forms of curatorial dialogue can be achieved. From this perspective, *Staging Dunhuang*, the inaugural exhibition of the Dunhuang Contemporary Art Museum in Shanghai, has been discussed as a significant experiment. Zhou and Xu (2025, p. 36) argue that this exhibition aims to generate relational meanings by orchestrating the juxtaposition and dialogue of cultural relics, ancient books, and contemporary artworks, thereby cultivating new perceptual and conceptual realms that emerge beyond conventional representational frameworks. Wang (2025, p.87) further emphasizes the curators' decision to prioritize an integrated and immersive exhibition environment over the presentation of canonical masterpieces.

In this space, curators display a narrative structure including four sections: History-Nature-Representation-Mindscape. Within this structure, they use spatial sequence, juxtaposition of artworks from different time periods, and multi-sensory interaction to encourage visitors to focus on their physical sensations and inner reflections (Zhou and Xu, p.37-38). In this scenario, this curatorial strategy attempts to go beyond what Stevenson has criticized, by situating the dialogue between present and past to take place within the audience's intuitive experience and reflective engagement.

Beyond questions of curatorial depth, another key debate centers on the interpretation of historical objects within dialogic exhibitions.. Stevenson criticized the strategy of decontextualizing historical objects into purely formalistic and eternal aesthetic object. By drawing on artist Rita Keegan's use of spices from the *Book of the Dead* in her 1994 artwork, Stevenson challenges the museum's visual-centric model, attempting to restore the olfactory dimension that artifacts might have had in their original context. Similarly, she uses Gala Porras-Kim's work to interrogate museum ethics and interpretive frameworks through a proposed reorientation of cultural artifacts in line with their original religious meanings (Stevenson, 2024, pp.105-108). These approaches may be understood as attempts to counteract the decontextualization produced by conventional museum practices.

Staging Dunhuang engages directly with these concerns. In *Staging Dunhuang*, curators also reflect on such curatorial practice. Specifically, curators employ the aesthetic display techniques of modern art museums, namely exquisite design of lightning and space. Simultaneously, they also use original artifacts, such as historical documents and restored ancient spices, to significantly reconstruct the original historical, geographical, and ritual context of the cultural relics (Wang, 2025, pp.88-91; Zhou and Xu, 2025, pp.41-44). This juxtaposition raises an underlying question that runs throughout the exhibition: whether *Dunhuang* should be understood primarily as an aestheticized cultural symbol or as a historically situated site shaped by specific material and spiritual practices.

Against this background, the paper asks: how can dialogic curatorship move beyond superficial juxtaposition, and through what material, spatial, sensory, and technological means can an exhibition produce a more sustained encounter between historical specificity and contemporary interpretation? By tracing how *Staging Dunhuang* constructs such encounters across its four sections, the paper contributes to debates on the limits and possibilities of "dialogue exhibitions" in today's hybrid museum-gallery environments.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Institutional Transformation and Dialogic Display

Scholarly debates on dialogic exhibitions can be grouped into three interconnected concerns: (1) whether “dialogue” becomes superficial juxtaposition, (2) how dialogic strategies reshape the treatment of historical objects under museum-gallery convergence, and (3) how dialogic curatorship relates to multi-temporality in contemporary exhibition-making.

The popularity of such exhibitions is closely connected to broader institutional transformations often described as the “museumization” of art galleries and the “gallerization” of museums. As Pei and Wang (2022) note, the introduction of modern artistic design elements and narrative approaches such as vibrant color palettes, storied contextual framing, and digital interactivity constitutes an effective strategy for revitalizing historical exhibitions and engaging contemporary audiences. Ma (2023) further argues that such infusion reflects the interweaving of two ideologies: Traditionally, museums have focused on the contextual interpretation and knowledge dissemination of “objects,” while art galleries have more emphasised the aesthetic presentation and conceptual expression of “artworks” .

Situated within a contemporary art museum, *Staging Dunhuang* exemplifies this convergence by combining scholarly reference to archaeological research with a thematic and atmospheric mode of presentation that departs from linear historical narration. The exhibition departs from the clear linear narratives and comprehensive didactic approaches typical of traditional museums, opting instead for thematic, evocative, and fragmentary storytelling that emphasizes atmospheric immersion and personal interpretation. This reflects the tendency toward the “gallerization of museums” , that is, employing the curatorial language of contemporary art to revitalize historical subject matter. Concurrently, the exhibition’s respect for and reference to archaeological research and historical context carry undertones of the “museumization of art museums,” whereby a deep historical dimension and scholarly foundation are infused into contemporary art presentation.

2.2 Multi-Temporality in Curatorial Theory

From this perspective, the ideal form of a “dialogue between past and present” is no longer just about lining up the old and the new. Rather, it involves the construction of a multi-temporal curatorial space in which different historical moments are brought into relation with one another. As Kosmadaki (2022) suggests, such practices challenge linear conceptions of time by allowing objects and institutions to be read across multiple temporal registers. The examples discussed by Kosmadaki illustrate how this logic operates in practice. At the Benaki Museum, Andy Holden positioned contemporary knitted “erratics” among ancient sculptures, drawing attention to the tension between deep geological time and the historical time of artifacts. Similarly, Adam Chodzko’s fictional posters projected speculative futures for the museum, prompting viewers to consider how institutional meanings might persist, fragment, or transform over time. Through strategies such as juxtaposition, displacement, and speculation, these works disrupt chronological narratives and foreground the temporal multiplicity embedded in museum collections.

Although *Staging Dunhuang* does not shake things up quite as radically as some of those examples, it still crafts a fluid, layered experience of time and space—through careful spatial design (like simulated cliff surfaces and grottoes), mixed media (watercolor sketches overlaid with digital projections), and connected imagery (weaving together historical events with starry cosmic views). Visitors walking through it do not encounter a clear-cut divide between past and present, but instead feel caught in what Wang (2025) calls a fantastical drift through stacked layers of time. In this respect, the exhibition aligns with Kosmadaki’s conception of multi-temporal curating by situating the audience within a network of temporal relations rather than presenting history as a fixed narrative.

As a concentrated practice, the exhibition *Staging Dunhuang* at the Dunhuang Contemporary Art Museum vividly embodies these tensions. It draws on the immersive capacities of contemporary exhibition design while remaining attentive to the historical and scholarly dimensions of Dunhuang studies. The exhibition thus offers a compelling case for examining how dialogic curatorship might negotiate the demands of historical specificity and contemporary interpretation.

2.3 Research Gap and Questions

Existing studies clarify the institutional conditions of dialogic exhibitions and the theoretical importance of multi-temporal curating. However, they mainly address dialogue at the level of curatorial intention or conceptual interpretation. Less attention has been paid to how dialogue is materially and experientially produced within a specific exhibition environment, through spatial sequencing, sensory design, and technological mediation in the visitor's encounter. A focused case study therefore provides an opportunity to analyze dialogue not only as a curatorial idea but as an observable exhibition practice. In doing so, it raises a broader question central to curatorial practice today: how can museums and galleries foster forms of dialogue that engage imagination and sensory experience without reducing the past to spectacle or severing it from its historical contexts?

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Data Collection

This study adopts a qualitative case-study approach to examine the curatorial strategies employed in *Staging Dunhuang*, the inaugural exhibition of the Dunhuang Contemporary Art Museum (DCAM). The analysis draws on a combination of first-hand institutional observation, exhibition documentation, and close reading of curatorial texts and spatial arrangements.

As a curatorial and administrative intern at the Dunhuang Contemporary Art Museum from February 27 to August 19, I worked across the Education and Curatorial Departments in China, where I supported a range of logistical, interpretive, and installation tasks. Although I was not part of the curatorial team for the museum's inaugural exhibition, *Staging Dunhuang*, I regularly conducted guided tours for visitors—including exchange students from Fudan University. During this period, I was provided with internal materials such as the official tour script and the exhibition brochure distributed to visitor. Edited by Executive Director Liu Yingjiu 刘迎九, curator Xu Huanzhi 徐缓之, and other museum staff, these documents are treated in this study as institutional sources that reflect the museum's curatorial intentions rather than as neutral descriptions.

Additional insight was gained during my involvement in the preparation of DCAM's second exhibition, *Pagoda: Higher Heights*, where I participated in aspects of curatorial planning and installation. This hands-on experience allowed me to observe the full exhibition workflow—from artist selection and spatial design to final presentation—and to collaborate closely with creative director Xu, artist Song Xi 宋兮, and DCAM Director and Chairwoman Du Chenyan 杜晨艳. I also attended sessions in which they presented the exhibition to visiting delegations, such as representatives from the Yangpu district government. These direct engagements fundamentally informed my interpretation of the museum's curatorial approach in this study.

This study draws on institutional observation conducted during the author's internship at DCAM. The author was not part of the curatorial decision-making team for *Staging Dunhuang* and treats internal documents (e.g., tour scripts and brochures) as institutional position

statements rather than neutral descriptions. To mitigate potential institutional bias, the analysis triangulates across (1) curatorial texts and official documentation, (2) spatial and material features observed in situ, and (3) publicly available visitor-facing materials. Interpretive claims are made only when supported by converging evidence from at least two of these sources.

3.2 Research ethics and positionality

As part of the methodological design, visual materials used in this paper are supplemented by images published on DCAM's official website and DCAM's official account on Rednote, one of the most popular Chinese social media platforms. The author accessed the exhibition during an internship at DCAM, with permission to conduct academic observation. The author did not participate in curatorial decision-making. The study focuses on exhibition design and visitor experience and does not involve interviews, recording of identifiable individuals, or collection of personal data. Only publicly visible posts are consulted, usernames, profile images, and links are not reported, and images are discussed analytically rather than reproduced as independent works. Because the material originates from the host institution, internal texts (e.g., brochures and tour scripts) are treated as curatorial statements rather than objective accounts. Interpretations are therefore checked against exhibition labels and on-site observation so that claims rely on consistent evidence across more than one source rather than a single institutional viewpoint.

3.3 Analytical Framework

The exhibition presents itself as a series of "dialogues", yet dialogue here cannot simply mean placing old and new objects side by side. What matters is how the encounter is produced for the visitor. In order to describe this more precisely, the analysis reads each section of the exhibition through three related aspects. First, materiality concerns what the objects are allowed to remain and what is transformed, whether replicas, fragments, sand, or pigments are presented as historical traces, aesthetic surfaces, or experiential media. Second, technological mediation addresses the role of projection, reconstruction, and display techniques in shaping how time and context are perceived rather than merely shown. Third, sensory engagement focuses on how lighting, movement, sound, and smell guide the visitor's bodily experience and influence interpretation. These aspects do not function separately. Each section of the exhibition combines them in different proportions, and the following analysis therefore returns to these three points at the end of each section to clarify what kind of "dialogue" is actually being produced.

4. Analysis and Findings

4.1. What is Staging Dunhuang?

The exhibition *Staging Dunhuang*, held in Shanghai, China from November 11, 2024, to May 31, 2025, features 27 works connected to Dunhuang culture, including 8 artifacts and their replicas. It was organized into four sections—History, Nature, Representation, and Mindscape—and spanned two floors (Figure 1).

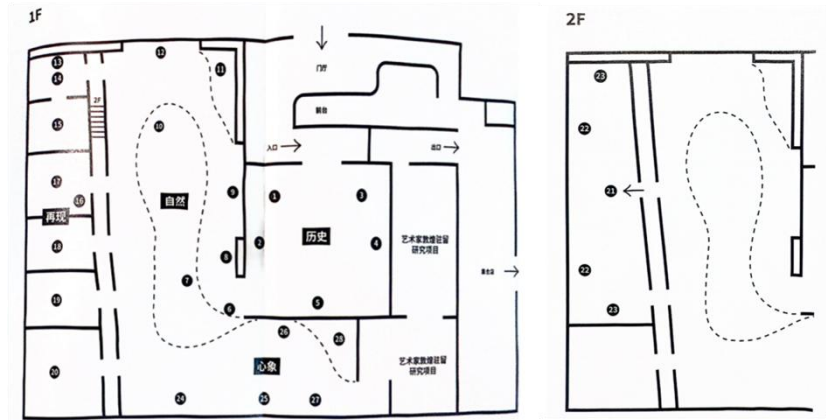


Figure 1. Floor Plan, 2024, from DCAM Staging Dunhuang official brochure, copyright © DCAM.

Each section articulated a distinct curatorial focus. The exhibition begins on the ground floor with the section “History,” which is characterized by dim lighting and red-painted walls. This section contains five artifacts in total, featuring both replicated relics and contemporary works recording the origin of Mogao Caves. Then, visitors enter the section “Nature” , where they witness an important scent installation of a large sand dune, which is surrounded by several photographs and cultural relics capturing the natural landscapes of Dunhuang. After this, visitors proceed into a series of small compartments housing artifacts that belong to the “Representation” section. These ground-floor compartments feature very low ceilings, recreating the confined, cave-like atmosphere of the Library Cave at the Mogao Grottoes.

Access to the first floor is provided via an external staircase covered in yellow, ore-colored fabric, a design choice intended to evoke the exterior surfaces of the Mogao Grottoes and the surrounding desert terrain. The upper level continues the “Representation” section, where contemporary artworks are arranged to form a landscape of mountains and trees. Finally, visitors descend the same staircase back to the ground floor and arrive at the “Mindscape” section. Upon exiting the exhibition, visitors encounter a final series of contemporary artworks produced through the Dunhuang artist-in-residence program.

The exhibition Staging Dunhuang provides a useful case for examining curatorial strategies that seek to establish a dialogue between past and present. While previous scholarship has addressed the exhibition’ s immersive qualities, the ways in which materials and technologies are mobilized to shape such dialogic experiences have received less detailed attention. The following analysis therefore draws on examples from each section to examine the roles of human interaction, materiality, and technicity within the museum context.

4.2. History

The “History” section introduces the exhibition’ s central curatorial concerns by foregrounding the historical and cultural significance of the Dunhuang grottoes. As a pivotal Silk Road nexus for over a millennium, Dunhuang developed a unique syncretic artistic tradition, primarily Buddhist, born from sustained commercial and cultural exchanges between China and regions to its west. The Mogao Grottoes, the site’ s most famous complex, functioned for centuries as a major Buddhist scholastic and trading center. Its 735 caves, carved into a cliff face, preserve an extensive body of murals, sculptures, and manuscripts.

Within this context, the curators stage a foundational juxtaposition: a meticulously produced replica of *Mogaoku ji* 莫高窟记 (Record of the Mogao Grottoes) (9th-10th century) and Gu Fei’ s 古菲 contemporary artwork *Jihen* 迹痕 (Traces · Marks) (Figure 2). It is worth noting that this pairing establishes a material and conceptual relationship between historical inscription and contemporary artistic translation.



Figure 2. *Mogaoku ji* 莫高窟记 (Record of the Mogao Grottoes) (9th-10th century) and a contemporary artwork *Jihen* 痕迹 (Traces · Marks) by Gu Fei 古菲, copyright © DCAM.

Mogaoku ji was originally inscribed on the north wall of the antechamber of Cave 156 from the Late Tang period. The inscription states that the grottoes originated when a monk named Le Zun 樂尊 arrived at the Mingsha Mountain, where he had a visionary experience and began carving the first grotto (Ma, 1987). The original manuscript, containing the same text as that carved on the wall, is held by the Bibliothèque nationale de France (labeled P.3720).

In collaboration with Fudan University's archaeology department and with formal authorization from the French institution, the Dunhuang Contemporary Art Museum produced a replica identical in size and textual content to the original. Displayed within a grey-toned structure and protected by glass, the replica is presented as an authoritative historical document. Research on museum replicas suggests that such displays can shape visitor understanding in ways comparable to original artifacts, depending on viewers' expectations and interpretive goals (Veldkamp, 2014). In this context, the replica supports the exhibition's aim of introducing audiences to the historical origins of the Mogao Grottoes.

Adjacent to the replica is Gu's work *Jihen*, in which she transcribes the full text of *Mogaoku ji* onto acrylic panels using stela-style seal script—the two central characters prominently positioned, evoking the solemn dignity of traditional stone inscriptions. Yet by employing transparent acrylic as her medium, Gu reframes the historical text within a contemporary material language. This act of transcription is not merely replication, but a deliberate translation across time: the historically weighty medium of stone inscription is translated into the immateriality of light and transparent synthetic material.

This relationship is further shaped through a deliberate lighting strategy that projects the text onto surrounding surfaces. A front-mounted light source causes the text to project onto the cinnabar-coloured wall and grey floor—the wall hue echoing the dominant red pigments of Mogao murals. Thus, the words escape their physical panel and spread across the exhibition space, immersing the viewer in a layered sensory environment. The static, monumental tradition of stele calligraphy becomes dynamic and enveloping, inviting the audience to walk through history as reflected light.

Through this arrangement, the work moves beyond conventional modes of display. While the textual content remains historical, its material and spatial presentation addresses contemporary modes of perception. The dialogic relationship between past and present is thus produced not only through content, but through the conditions of encounter themselves. This strategy directly counters critiques that contemporary art serves merely as illustrative vassalage (Stevenson, 2024); here, it acts as a critical interlocutor, re-embodiment historical content to

activate a phenomenological engagement where past and present coalesce in the viewer's experience.

The section's engagement with historical interpretation deepens with the digital installation of the Mogao cliff—*Yichuan xingxuan* 一川星悬 (The Mogao Cliff Lightened) (2024) by Zhou Zhenru 周真如 and Chen Zhihao 陈芷豪 (Figure 3). Drawing from historical surveys conducted by the Russian Oldenburg Expedition (1914–1915)—preserved in line sketches provided by the State Hermitage Museum—the piece reconstructs the Mogao Grottoes cliff face as it appeared in the early 20th century. Notably, the central pagoda is depicted with only five stories, reflecting its pre-restoration state and thus offering a glimpse into the site's historical layering and continual transformation.



Figure 3. *Yichuan xingxuan* 一川星悬 (The Mogao Cliff Lightened) by Zhou Zhenru 周真如 and Chen Zhihao 陈芷豪, 2024, projection on rice paper, giclée print, 1090 × 98.8 cm, copyright © DCAM.

Through carefully modulated lighting, the installation evokes a scene described in Dunhuang manuscripts in which lamps illuminated the cave niches during the Laba Festival, their reflections shimmering on the Dangquan River. Here, digital imaging and luminous simulation do not merely illustrate a story, they recreate a perceptual and spiritual moment, allowing contemporary viewers to visually inhabit a recorded past. This practice transcends the decontextualized, aestheticized display of history criticized by Stevenson (2024). Instead, it leverages technology not for spectacle but for speculative recontextualization—attempting to reconstruct a specific perceptual and spiritual atmosphere from Dunhuang's ritual past. It presents history not as a fixed image but as a layered, transformative process, offering a glimpse into the site's continual becoming. This approach aligns with Kosmadaki's (2022) discussion of multi-temporal curating, in which different historical moments are folded into the present experience of viewing. Across the "History" section, materiality is foregrounded through historically anchored replicas and inscriptions, while technological mediation (projection, light simulation) re-stages past perceptual conditions. These strategies are completed through sensory engagement, especially spatial lighting and viewer movement, so that dialogue emerges as an embodied encounter rather than a purely visual comparison.

4.3. Nature and Representation

The "Nature" and "Representation" sections advance the exhibition's core curatorial inquiry by strategically employing natural materials to forge a multi-sensory and temporally layered dialogue. This approach directly engages with the debates concerning the contextualization of historical artifacts and the creation of an immersive, multi-temporal space.

A key juxtaposition occurs between a cultural relic, *Tangcaihui Hurenqiantuo Tumoyinzhuan* 唐彩绘胡人牵骆驼模印砖 (the Painted Brick of Hu People Leading a Camel), and a scent installation, *Mingsha xiangshan* 鸣沙香山 (Scented Mingsha shan) produced by artist Lu

Wen 鲁雯 (Figure 4). While the brick, displayed in a vitrine, serves as a conventional historical index of Silk Road trade, Lu Wen's work operates on a phenomenological level.



Figure 4. *Tangcaihui Hurenqiantuo Tumoyinzhuan* inside glass showcase with *Mingsha xiangshan* installation in the background, Copyright © DCAM.

The sand dune was very expansive, occupying a large portion of the exhibition space. The artist used ancient incense formulas recorded in the Library Cave manuscripts as references and recreated traditional incense with Dunhuang spices. She then burned the incense and allowed the intangible qualities of fragrance to adhere to the sand. This is more evident in her artwork *Mogaoku lingye* 莫高窟灵叶 (Mogao Grottoes Spirit Leave), where small pieces of incense, fallen leaves, and plants derived from Dunhuang are visible (Figure 5). Related design elements extend beyond the exhibition galleries, as sand and vegetation associated with Dunhuang also appear in adjacent museum spaces, reinforcing a sense of environmental continuity.

This curatorial strategy responds to Stevenson's (2024) critique of visually dominant and decontextualized display practices by reintroducing olfactory experience as a mode of historical engagement. The scented sand functions not simply as a visual element, but as an environmental presence that surrounds the viewer and evokes the sensory dimensions of Dunhuang's landscape and ritual life. By extending this strategy beyond the exhibition space, the boundary between curated display and embodied experience is further softened.



Figure 5. *Mogaoku lingye* 莫高窟灵叶 (Mogao Grottoes Spirit Leave), 2024, natural spices, Mogao Grottoes Leaf, Copyright © DCAM.

The thematic focus on material agency deepens in the "Representation" section, notably through the *Gangrenboqi xianghui zuopin xilie* 《冈仁波齐》香灰作品系列 (Mount Kailash Incense Ash on Linen series) by artist Zhang Huan 张洹. Zhang discovered the allure of incense ash at Jing'an Temple in Shanghai. In the temple, countless devoted men and women were sincerely offering incense and praying to the Buddha, and the burning ocean of incense created immense

energy. For Zhang, incense ash carries the collective memories and blessings of countless believers, and so he uses incense ash as a Buddhist spiritual medium to create his artworks. The subject of the series, Mount Kailash, located in Ngari Prefecture, Tibet, is revered by millions across several religions. In Buddhist tradition, it is often identified with the legendary Fragrant Mountain (Gandhamādana), described in scriptures as a sacred realm filled with music, dance, and divine fragrances. Scholars generally regard Mount Kailash in Tibet as the real-world prototype for this mythical mountain, linking Zhang's use of incense ash directly to both lived religious practice and the symbolic geography of Buddhism.

Through these material juxtapositions, the exhibition moves beyond illustrating historical content to demonstrate how materials can mediate human experience and shape perception (Appadurai, 1986; Gell, 1998; Hayward, 2024). The painted brick, the scented sand, and the incense ash are not passive artifacts or formal elements; they are presented as active participants in a continuous process of meaning-making. They bridge temporal divides: the Tang Dynasty, the ritual present from which the ash was collected, and the contemporary moment of aesthetic contemplation. By foregrounding the spiritual and sensory properties of materials derived from or evocative of Dunhuang, the curation constructs what Kosmadaki (2022) might term a heterochronic space. In this space, historical trade (the brick), ancient ritual (the incense recipe), ongoing devotion (the source of the ash), and modern artistic intervention collide, inviting a reflection on cultural heritage as a living, sensory, and materially-embedded continuum rather than a series of isolated aesthetic objects. Here, materiality operates as an active carrier of context (sand, incense, ash), and sensory engagement, most notably olfaction, reintroduces ritual and landscape registers often flattened by visual display. Technological mediation is comparatively restrained, allowing material agency and atmosphere to do the primary dialogic work.

4.1. Mindscape

The concluding "Mindscape" section marks a deliberate and significant shift in the exhibition's curatorial methodology. Inspired by Yuval Noah Harari's talk *AI and Human Evolution*, the section takes its title from the Buddhist idea that what is commonly perceived as reality may be shaped by the workings of the mind. Moving away from the materially grounded dialogues of the previous sections, "Mindscape" presents three contemporary artworks derived from the artists' subjective engagements with Dunhuang. In doing so, it brings into focus a recurring tension in debates on past-present dialogue: the risk that contemporary interpretation may come to overshadow historical specificity.

Unlike the preceding sections, which anchored the dialogue in historical artifacts (relics, replicated manuscripts, archaeologically-informed scents) or materials with a tangible connection to the site (local sands, ritual ash), "Mindscape" employs the conventional media and tools of Western modern art—acrylic, oil, sculptural assemblage. The referent to Dunhuang is not materially embedded but intellectually and affectively posited. References to Dunhuang are therefore not materially embedded but articulated through intellectual and affective association. For example, Ding Yi's 丁乙 painting *Shishi 2018-2* 十示 2018-2 (Repetitive geometric patterning) is conceptually linked by the artist to an aerial view of the Yardang landforms near Dunhuang, yet its geometric, diamond-patterned visual language remains open to multiple modernist readings. Without curatorial framing, these works might not self-evidently signify "Dunhuang" to the viewer. This raises an important question: does this curatorial move extend dialogue into the realm of contemporary subjective response, or does it risk reducing historical reference to a secondary point of departure for autonomous artistic expression?

The section can be read as a conscious experiment in testing the limits of the “dialogue” framework. It ventures beyond contextual reconstruction or material transposition and into the domain of purely conceptual and affective resonance. In doing so, it reflects the “gallerization” tendency noted by Ma (2023), privileging the aesthetic and conceptual autonomy of the contemporary artwork. At the same time, it may be read in relation to Kosmadaki’s (2022) discussion of multi-temporality, insofar as it introduces a distinctly contemporary temporal layer shaped by the artists’ reflective and imaginative responses. Here, dialogue emerges less between objects from different periods than between the historical-cultural construct of “Dunhuang” and the present-day subjectivity of individual artists.

A related dynamic can be seen in *Jiletianzhong 3 伎乐天众 3 (Goddess of Music No. 3)* by Shi Zhiying 石至莹. Drawing on the chromatic relationships found in Dunhuang depictions of flying apsaras, the artist uses oil painting to translate traditional imagery into a contemporary visual language. Through color and brushwork, the work conveys a sense of rhythmic movement associated with the artist’s personal response to the murals. The choice of oil paint—a medium historically linked to Western artistic traditions—to depict an Eastern cultural subject introduces a material and cultural displacement. Rather than reproducing tradition, the work foregrounds its transformation through contemporary artistic practice.

Ultimately, “Mindscape” poses the exhibition’s most provocative hermeneutic challenge. It compels viewers to consider whether a meaningful dialogue with heritage can be sustained through subjective interpretation alone, absent the mediating presence of historical materiality. The section thus leaves the audience with an open question central to contemporary curatorial theory: in seeking to avoid the museological objectification of the past, how can we foster engagements that are both personally resonant and responsibly connected to the historical and cultural specificities they claim to engage? “Mindscape” shifts the dialogic centring from materiality to contemporary subjectivity: technological mediation recedes, while sensory engagement relies more on aesthetic contemplation than contextual reconstruction. This deliberate imbalance tests the limits of dialogue by asking whether affective resonance can remain responsibly connected to historical specificity.

5. Discussion

In *Staging Dunhuang*, dialogue is produced through the conditions of encounter rather than through visual comparison alone. Meaning emerges as visitors move through atmospheres shaped by light, spatial sequencing, and mediated reconstruction. The question therefore shifts from whether contemporary elements correctly interpret history to how exhibitions organise perception and attention.

From this perspective, dialogue functions as an operational strategy. Historical material is neither treated as autonomous aesthetic form nor returned to a single original context. Instead, multiple temporal references remain simultaneously available, allowing visitors to orient themselves among them. The effectiveness of dialogue thus depends less on juxtaposition itself than on how spatial, sensory, and technical arrangements structure temporal experience.

This reading is tied to a specific institutional setting. The exhibition relies on the recognisability of Dunhuang and on the spatial flexibility of a contemporary art museum. In other contexts, similar techniques may produce different effects. The case therefore indicates a curatorial mode rather than a generalizable formula.

6. Conclusions

This paper has examined *Staging Dunhuang* as a case through which to reconsider the idea of a “dialogue between past and present.” Rather than treating dialogue as the juxtaposition of historical artifacts and contemporary artworks, the analysis shows how it is constructed through

exhibition form, through spatial organisation, material presentation, and sensory experience across the exhibition's sections.

The exhibition does not resolve the tension between historical specificity and contemporary interpretation. Instead, it maintains this tension as part of the viewing experience, allowing multiple temporal meanings to remain open rather than unified. In doing so, it demonstrates a curatorial approach that prioritises encounter over closure.

By situating this approach within a hybrid museum-gallery context, the study highlights how contemporary exhibitions can engage cultural heritage without reducing it to spectacle or fixing it into a single interpretive framework. The case therefore contributes to current discussions of dialogic curatorship by showing how dialogue can function as a practical exhibition method rather than solely a theoretical aspiration.

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