

Some conservation problems of Khara-Khoto's paintings on the silk

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(State Hermitage)

State Hermitage has a large collection of Chinese Buddhist art objects, which includes a unique group of Buddhist art objects found in excavating the "famous" suburgan near the dead city of Khara-Khoto in Northwest China (the Tangut state Xi Xia 982-1227). The excavation was carried out by P.K. Kozlov on the instructions of Russian Imperial Geographic Association (1908-1909).

The collection under consideration consists of about 250 pieces, the most part from them are icons which painted on the canvas or on the silk. The paintings on the silk present very rear technique of painting, which includes Chinese and Tibetan traditions. Several years ago after excavation paintings some of them were glued on the sheets of cardboard or on the tulle.

The most part of paintings was in poor condition, as a result of long-term storage under ground in humid environment. The support of paintings was lost partly, the paint layer was strongly destroyed. It was detached from the support, coved with cracks, suffered peeling and dusting.

The main aim of our work was to study and to search appropriate methods of conservation and mounting of very destroyed paintings on the silk.

At the beginning of work we removed the old cardboard, tulle and residues of glue. Then we used traditional Japanese methods restoration of panting on the silk using organic glues and Japanese paper.

For the consolidation of the painting layer we used different techniques depending on the condition of the painting. In general we used 0,5-2,0 % solution of gelatin applied with brush or an Ultrasonic mister, and also with the help of a graphic Section table. As a rule, it was necessary to combine these methods.

Lining on a new support directly on Japanese paper was made in the case when the original support of the painting is badly damaged. For repairing of the significant losses of the support we used Japanese paper too. Then filled losses, as a rule, was retouched.

We try as much as possible to save the original material and historical image of the painting.

The storage of paintings on the silk is one of the important part of their preservation.. For the small paintings after restoration we used the back made from acid free cardboard. In case of large painting we fixed them on a board with Japanese paper. The result of our work was consolidation of the paint layer and support and development of a procedure of storing the paintings on the silk.