



# The Silk Road on the Mall

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For ten days this summer, the great geographical and cultural distance that lies between the heart of Europe and the far reaches of Asia is being reduced to the length of a leisurely afternoon stroll on the National Mall. For the first time in its 36-year history, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival has a single — and remarkably ambitious — theme: the Silk Road. The name denotes the network of trade routes, over both land and sea, along which merchants and travelers began to move across Asia and Europe from the first millennium B.C.E. The most famous east-west component of the Silk Road began in Xi'an, the ancient capital of China, broke north and south of China's Takla Makan Desert, and traversed a vast stretch of Central and Western Asia on its way to the eastern end of the Mediterranean. Along those staggering distances lay a wealth of cultures and traditions. They are still there; during the Folklife Festival, they come to life in the heart of Washington as well.

Merchants took to the Silk Road for commercial gain. But their movement also brought riches of another kind: the cultural traditions that were transported along the Silk Road. The ingenious, distinctive emblems of peoples — their science, technology, religions, customs, crafts, music, food, architecture, fashions — made the journey, too, and the dazzling variety of the world that commerce opened was diffused, welcomed, and adapted.

That's the tale to be told in this year's Folklife Festival, *The Silk Road: Connecting Cultures, Creating Trust*. Produced in association with the Silk Road Project, Inc., an organization founded by the cellist Yo-Yo Ma, supported in large part by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, and featuring exhibits designed by Rajeev Sethi, the Festival turns the National Mall into a mammoth visual representation of the Silk Road, with the Great Gate in Nara, Japan, at the eastern end, toward the Capitol, and St. Mark's Square in Venice at the western end, in the shadow of the Washington Monument. And between the two, visitors will wander Eurasia, through Istanbul, Samarkand, and Xi'an. On the way they'll move among hundreds of musicians, artists, dancers, crafts workers, and chefs from some two dozen nations of the Silk Road, working side by side with Americans who trace their origins to the region or have been culturally influenced by its traditions.

An especially valuable aspect of the event is its focus on Central Asia, a region to which we Americans were all too indifferent before events of the past year. We now know the names of the nations in that part of the world. The Festival gives the people of those nations and their traditions a human face.

Visitors who make the journey across the Festival site can immerse themselves in the energy and larger educational purpose of the Festival; they'll have an opportunity to travel across continents, centuries, and cultures. They will meet with a diversity of artists who, through their demonstrations of skill — with silk, jewelry, ceramics, carpets, paintings, paper, calligraphy, food, and, not least, music — do more than merely affirm their cultural traditions. They embody them. This year's Folklife Festival, like every other, celebrates humanity and breathes a spirit of human engagement. On a great green stretch of this nation's capital, people from many different societies will be brought together face to face. And those chance, transient encounters may affect the way they think about the world.

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