

The Silk Road: Connecting Cultures, Creating Trust

by Richard Kennedy

For 35 years the Smithsonian Folklife Festival has presented well over a hundred programs focused on the traditional cultures of nations, regions, states, and communities, as well as on various occupations and themes. Never before has a Festival been devoted to one topic; never before has a Festival offered such research, conceptual, and logistical challenges. Producing *The Silk Road* for the 2002 Smithsonian Folklife Festival has stretched our thinking, our professional abilities, and our relationships with collaborating organizations. This has been a daunting but exhilarating effort, and one well worth doing in the hopes of benefitting both the American public and people of Silk Road lands.



The Silk Road, a term coined in the 19th century with 20th-century PR savvy, defines an exchange of products, both material and intellectual, across Eurasia from China to the Mediterranean, traditionally from the 2nd century B.C.E. and over the first 1,200 years of the Common Era. People who know something of the Silk Road think first of the transport of silk to Rome or the expansion of Buddhism from India to China, although certainly it is much more. But why silk, and why a road to describe this exchange? Silk provides the example of a mysterious luxury product for which people throughout the region were willing to pay high prices and even jeopardize lives. And the “road” refers to the exchange of those material products that traveled by land, although this literal meaning must be extended to include cultural and spiritual exchanges that would be part of a metaphorical Silk Road. Beyond these definitions the idea of the Silk Road is still available for new interpretations. And in the present political environment the idea is particularly evocative.

One reason Smithsonian staff has been particularly excited to work on a Silk Road project at this time is the political transformations that have taken place in the region over the previous two decades. The opening of China and the collapse of the Soviet Union have enabled researchers, businessmen, and travelers alike to visit a vast area little known to Westerners in the past hundred years. A new Silk Road is being traveled. The modest victories of



democracy and capitalism at the end of the second millennium allowed strangers once again to meet along the ancient roads of silk and once again exchange ideas and products. People spoke of new economic and political realities, and it seemed that new cultural realities were likely developing out of this transformation as well. If oil was the new silk, and democracy the new religion, then where did the old cultural traditions of the Silk Road stand? Had they withstood the onslaught of the Mongols, the seafaring European capitalists, and the more recent Russian and Chinese communists? How had they been transformed?

The understanding of exchange along the Silk Road has broadened with new archaeological discoveries throughout the region. It is now clear that there has been trade between what is now defined as Europe and Asia for many millennia. Textiles, beads, and languages all moved across the region centuries before

(Above left) Ahmed Şahin continued the centuries-old tradition of çini pottery in Kütahya, Turkey. Çini pottery has its roots in the blue-and-white tradition of China, elaborating the art with finely painted surfaces.

Photo by Henry Glassie/Pravina Shukla

(Above right) Pottery studios like this one in Jingdezhen, China, have produced the famous blue-and-white porcelain for over 600 years. Jingdezhen ware influenced ceramics in Japan, Turkey, and throughout Europe.

Photo by Richard Kennedy © Smithsonian Institution

the Common Era. Traffic between India and Europe, including Russia (a North/South component of the Silk Road), was always an integral part of the Silk Road and continued long after the collapse of the 13th-century Pax Mongolica that closed major land routes across Eurasia. Products and ideas have been continuously exchanged back and forth across the region, and that exchange continues today. *The Silk Road Festival* features only a select few of these living traditions, but their survival will tell surprising stories of long-standing connections between peoples and nations.

Visitors to the Festival will be greeted by five “sentinels of arrival,” landmarks along the ancient Silk Road — St. Mark’s Square in Venice, Hagia Sophia (Ayasofya) mosque/church/museum in Istanbul, Registan Square in Samarkand, the Xi’an bell tower, and the great gate to Todaiji Temple in Nara. Each will house a stage that reflects a different performance tradition. The performing arts selected for the Festival have been grouped into spiritual activities, courtly entertainment, local celebrations and entertainments, nomadic presentations, and new musics that draw from tradition. Spiritual music, for example, provides the program an opportunity to present the stories of the expansion of religion — Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity — along the Silk Road. Buddhist monks from Tibet and Sufi Muslim devotees from Turkey and Bangladesh will highlight the central role that religion played in Silk Road trade.



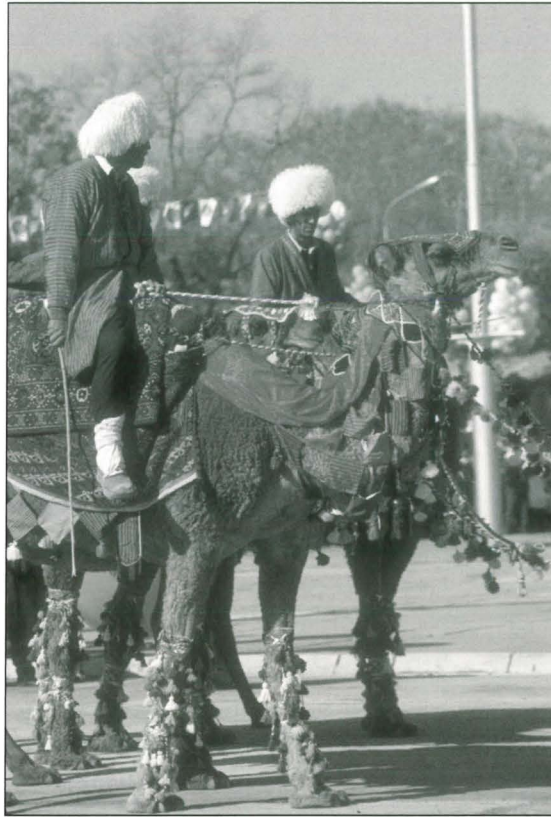
The Silk Road was not just a story of merchants, nomads, and dusty caravanserais, but also functioned because of powerful military forces based in urban centers along the route. These centers not only hosted the travelers and exacted tolls but also supported communities of artists of all kinds. Craftspeople and musicians traveled throughout the region, sometimes freely, sometimes subject to restrictions, and sometimes even as prisoners of war. Music of the royal courts, some of which survives, was an important tradition developed in these centers. *Maqam* ensembles from Azerbaijan to Xinjiang as well as Chinese and Japanese courtly music still have a place in the lives of people along the Silk Road.

These centers were also a place of cultural confluence and celebration. Folk musics, then as now, were a part of everyday life. Bukharan Jews settled in Central Asia and now in the United States still celebrate traditional weddings, while contemporary Armenian and Chinese folk ensembles share instruments if not a language in their musics. Similarly, nomads from Iran to Mongolia, who were so instrumental in supporting the caravans on their journeys, share stories, songs and language. Their fine

Bukharan Jewish musician Ilyas Malaev plays the tanbur on the balcony of his apartment in Queens, New York. Bukharan music, Chinese opera, karate, and pizza all came to the U.S. with immigrants from Silk Road countries. Photo © Hermine Dreyfuss

weaving skills are displayed in the textiles that decorate camels, brought to the Festival site to demonstrate nomadic travel. In the twenty-first century transport is more often by painted trucks, on which similar aesthetic skills are brought to bear.

Trade products are perhaps easier to trace along the Silk Road than music. Existing examples of ancient silk, pottery, carpets, and glass all tell very specific stories of travel and exchange and remind us of the extent to which people across the region have been connected throughout history. What may be surprising to some, however, is how many such objects are still made today. The curatorial staff has chosen to feature ceramics, silk and cotton textiles, carpets, paper, and stone and metal products, including glass. Each is in a different compound — the Paper Garden, the Ceramics Courtyard, the Silk Grove, the Family Oasis, and the Jewel Garden — and tells a story from a different period along the Silk Road, including, in some cases, a chapter from life in the United States. Paper, for example, was invented in China and remained a secret of the region for centuries; along with written language, writing materials were thought to possess magical qualities. Religious texts as well as commercial bills were written out and transported along a route that, through such communication, could more easily function. Each region added its own distinctive features of paper art including Turkish marbling and Italian watermarks. Similar elaborations have been made in the art of calligraphy, which, particularly in Islamic and Chinese cultures, has become highly refined and stylistically differentiated as to



Decorated camels participate in an Independence Day parade in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan. Decorating camels displays the fine weaving skills of nomads and mirrors the skills of Pakistani truck painters.

Photo © Hermine Dreyfuss

school and usage. Representatives of these schools still train new generations of artists along the Silk Road and in the United States.

Certain ceramics along the Silk Road became particularly sought after. Finely painted, pure porcelain from China was greatly desired by the Islamic elite and was traded from China east to Japan and west across Asia, and eventually on to Europe. Japanese and Turkish potters put their own stamp on this ceramic tradition. On the coattails of porcelain came tea, and with the passion for tea in the West came the fine teapots of China and Japan. Chinese, Japanese, and Turkish ceramics traditions all remain vital.

Silk was the most highly visible product to come to Rome during the first large-scale Silk Road exchange around the beginning of the Common Era. In fact it was more than a symbol for luxury exchange; it was an obsession of the Roman elite and caused a serious drain of gold and silver to the East. As explained by Richard Kurin in his article, silk moved easily and became a “vehicle of cultural creativity wherever it went.” This continued creativity can be seen in the fashion designers at the Festival from Japan and Central Asia. But silk’s flexibility can also be seen in the *ikat* and embroidery techniques still produced by hand in India, Uzbekistan, and Syria. Cotton has a similarly long if less expensive history. From India cotton traveled to Central Asia and Europe, becoming the crop that almost ruined economies as varied as those of 20th-century Uzbekistan and the 19th-century American South. Cotton production became a symbol of India’s independence in the 1930s and an ecological disaster in parts of Central Asia. Both fibers, though, have for millennia been continuously woven and embroidered to suit the fashion of people.

Carpets have a more nomadic history, which springs from the looms of sheep herders in ancient Iran and Central Asia. One

of the extraordinary archaeological discoveries of the 20th century was the 4th-century B.C.E. Pazyryk carpet, found perfectly preserved on the Eurasian steppes west of Mongolia. This finely woven carpet connected the frozen steppe with Persian civilization and indicated that carpet weaving stretched back more than three millennia. The carpet has been an important decorative element of nomadic culture that has carried its motifs across the Silk Road region for thousands of years. At the Festival, audiences can see Turkmen carpet weavers, whose ancestors fled the tsars' persecution to Afghanistan and now, in the most recent upheavals, reside in Pakistan still weaving patterns known throughout the region. They are joined by other exiles, Tibetans who have brought their weaving traditions to new homes in India and Nepal away from Chinese domination, and by settled Turkish weavers who carry on the tradition and motifs of their nomadic ancestors.

Workers in stone and metals also fashioned luxury goods for exchange. People all along the Silk Road sought jewelry and engraved metal containers that were easily transported. Glass and stone beads particularly were traded throughout history and are often found far from their source. Lapis lazuli from the Pamir Mountains, precious gems from India, and turquoise all found their way to Rome, Byzantium, China, and Japan. Festival visitors can meet contemporary jewelers from Syria, Turkey, and India, and bead makers from Pakistan and Europe. Glass, which like silk seemed magical to those who did not understand its origins, was traded from the Middle East to China. Unlike textiles and jewelry it did not travel well, and its exchange is more difficult to trace. Glass and metalwork, however, are two of the

Painted trucks travel the ancient silk roads between Pakistan and China.

Photo by Mark Kenoyer © Smithsonian Institution



great Islamic decorative traditions that still survive. The Venetians, in turn, took glass art perhaps to its highest form.

The movement of religious traditions around the world has arguably been one of the most important forces throughout world history. Both Islam and Buddhism were introduced to millions of new adherents along the Silk Road, and these conversions

continue to alter the face of our world. These religions, along with all of the above exchange goods, have also altered the face of the United States. Many Americans drink tea in fine china, buy "Oriental" carpets, and certainly wear garments of cotton, wool, and silk. They are likely familiar with Asian martial arts and may attend an Islamic mosque. The Silk Road has extended to the United States and, since

the tragic events of September 11, understanding that connection clearly has become more important. There is no better time, then, to learn more about the roots of this vital connection and to celebrate the long-standing relationships that have existed between East and West and North and South. This Festival provides a rare opportunity to connect with other cultures as well as with one's own and in doing so, in a small way, to build trust between and within cultures of the global Silk Road.

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