



# Making the Silk Road Festival

by Rajeev Sethi

As a South Asian, the influence of the ancient Silk Road is part of my living reality. Helping create a Festival that would constitute a major pan-Asian presence on the National Mall has been a rare opportunity. Interface between the Asian diaspora in the United States, the American public, and hundreds of Silk Road artists can help us better understand who we are as Asians and what we mean to the world.



In search of a comprehensible and meaningful Asian identity, I was most inspired by commonalities, still visible across many countries, where the past and the present are never far apart. The design for the Festival evolved through my search. As I traveled through Uzbekistan, China, Japan, Italy, Turkey, and South Asia, contemplating the Festival's possible scenography, I was greeted with much proactive good will for the Silk Road concept. It has been seen as well in related projects — Pakistan, China, and various Central Asian nations have joined in developing their own Silk Road festivals, for example, while the Japanese Silk Road Foundation has sought to map historic trade routes across Eurasia using satellite technology. People are enthused by the idea of being seen as part of a phenomenon that predates globalization and yet continues to unite them in a variety of contemporary adaptations and re-inspirations.

The Festival design on the Mall reflects this concept of continuity and change. It offers a seamless journey in which each visitor is a traveler. Positioned between the U.S. Capitol Building and the Washington Monument, the vast Silk Road stretches along Washington's central vista. The regions represented by iconic monuments on the Silk Road are conceived as a series on the east-west axis. I called them "sentinels of arrival."

As portals of entry to their respective regions, these sentinels welcome and bid farewell to "travelers." As the guardians of territories and defenders of the great faiths of the world, I originally wanted them to be experienced in their real scale; having to design them within a limited budget and time frame was a challenge.



Architectural representation offers a slippery path. Deviating from tradition can mean not knowing where you fall, if you slip. How could we reinterpret in Washington these glorious specimens of an immensely influential material heritage — a heritage reflected in the very monuments and museums surrounding the Festival site? Replication of ancient monuments using existing skills would be one answer, but too expensive. Reducing the scale and finding a new context on the Mall without becoming Disney-esque became a huge concern, but one in which, with the use of deconstruction, playfulness, and contemporary artistic adaptation, I hope we succeed.

The Great South Gate of Todaiji Temple in Nara, Japan, already influenced by Chinese architecture, is restructured with bamboo and textiles. A body of suspended *noren* fabric screens calligraphed by Japanese and Indian contemporary artists redefined the architecture as an extension of traditional skills and as an affirmation of their training as fine artists. The principles of the Silk Road's artistic exchange were applied to the Festival. Japanese screens were fabricated in villages of Andhra Pradesh, India, where craftsmen had been exposed to Japanese *shibori* and have worked with contemporary international designers.

The ancient Xi'an bell tower, a sentinel symbolizing China's historical growth, required a contemporary interpretation. The Festival's bell tower, painted on screen-printed silk organza,

(Above left) The Great South Gate of Todaiji Temple in Nara, Japan. Photo by Jiro Okura

(Above right) As interpreted by Rajeev Sethi Scenographers for the Folklife Festival.



hangs in the air like an exquisite memory of a glorious past beckoning a grand future.

The Buddhas of Bamiyan, carved in the niches of Afghan cliffs, were symbols of a secure haven for weary travelers. Seen from afar, the now destroyed Buddhas were the gateway to South Asia and evoked awe and tranquility. Buddhism defied any representation of the Buddha's body for many centuries after his death, so the destruction of the statues would perhaps have made the sage smile. As an act of contrition, a collective Asian catharsis, three Muslim sculptors from Pakistan who excel in carving Gandharan images create a plaster or soft stone Buddhist image at the Festival.

The Registan Square in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, resplendent in its austere symmetry and profuse ornamentation, offers a play of distances. We used a part of an arch in its actual scale and the monument in reduced ratio. The square presents a stunning combination of tile mosaic, *cuerda seca*, and the *bannai* technique where rectangular pieces of glazed tile alternate with unglazed bricks to create magical patterns which at times spell out sacred names. To suggest the way ceramic mosaics reflect and deflect light, we created a varying color palette at the Festival with a collage of layer upon layer of fine tissue paper!

Instead of recreating Istanbul's Hagia Sophia (Ayasofya) on the Mall, we recreated its plan as architectural ornamentation. The Byzantine configurations of ceramic blue tiles, the patterned lead roofs and domes upon domes, as well as the inlaid stone calligraphy that matured during the Islamic period, are represented. The continuity of architectural features is again seen at the western end of the Mall, in the archways of the Venetian sentinel, the Basilica of St. Mark (Basilica di San Marco), fabricated with an overlay of different historical periods and cultural influences that characterized that merchant city-state and terminus of the Silk Road.

The process of designing the site required much research and inspiration. Finding popular cultural metaphors and talented professionals in different parts of Asia became necessary. India, like an open palm stretched under a thriving Silk Road, became an overflowing crucible with seminal churnings. The Asian Heritage Foundation sought out skills within the Indian subcon-

tinents that would complement the work of craftspeople from other Silk Road nations. Most of what has been fabricated on the Mall at the Festival has come from the unique synthesis of crafts seen on the Silk Road and would have been a part of the ancient trade. So craftsmen of Khurja and Jaipur in Rajasthan were commissioned to paint Turkish tiles. Sikkimese painters gilded Chinese architectural elements. *Ikats* from Uzbekistan and Japan were eagerly emulated on looms in Andhra Pradesh and Bihar. Screens, tents, and canopies from villages all over India were used to shade and filter light in a variety of Asian styles. Mats and rugs embellished with Silk Road iconography were easily understood, copied, and improvised upon.

The resonance of common motifs — the felines from Venice to Mongolia, the mosaic angels of Venice, the *farishtahs* of Central Asia, the *apsarases* of India, and the celestial beings of China and Japan — all appear as exhibits on stretched canvas walls demarcating the boundaries of the site. Pan-Asian composite beings, the lozenge, the star and the sunburst, blue pottery as an architectural ornament, and most of all the Tree of Life, an evocative metaphor for the Silk Road, helped us define our story.

The story is not new; many schools and styles were assimilated by this great grafted tree called the Silk Road. The more thorough the interaction, the more vibrant the resulting bloom. The Festival now takes its place among the living evidences of a common ethos and sensibilities. Like a banyan the branches have become roots and the spread is wide ... and widening.

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