

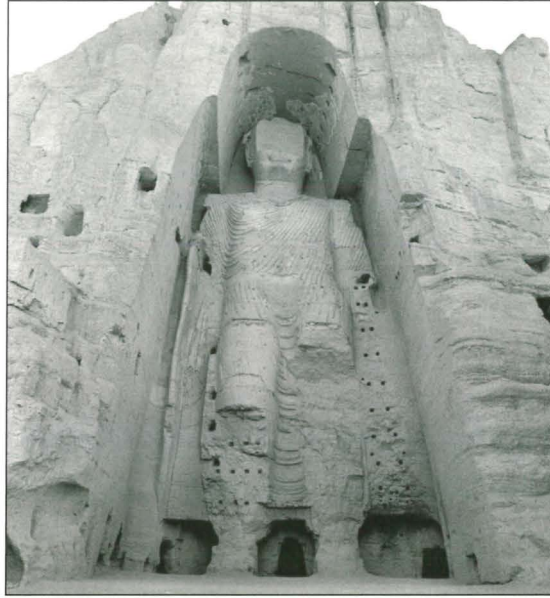
Visual Arts of the Historical Silk Road

by Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis

Although people, ideas, and goods had been traveling across Eurasia for millennia, the historical Silk Road is considered to have been established in the 2nd century B.C.E. when a Chinese envoy journeyed into Central Asia in search of horses and allies to fight marauders on the borders of China. Soon afterward, Buddhism began to spread from India north along Silk Road land routes to Central Asia, China, Korea, and Japan and south by sea routes to Southeast Asia. Buddhist art and architecture, of course, were transmitted along with the religious doctrines. One of the major architectural monuments of Buddhism is the stupa, in India a solid hemispherical mound signifying the death and final great enlightenment of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni who lived and taught ca. 450 B.C.E. Influenced by the shape of Chinese watchtowers, the stupa was transformed into a multistoried pagoda in China, Korea, and Japan, but it retained its original symbolism.

Until about the beginning of the Common Era, the Buddha was represented by signs such as the Bodhi Tree under which he experienced enlightenment and the Wheel of the Law, a term given to Buddhist teachings. By the time Buddhism was spreading to the rest of Asia, in the 1st–2nd centuries C.E., worship was aided by anthropomorphic images. The human image of the Buddha first developed in two places on the Indian subcontinent — in Gandhara (present-day northwest Pakistan) and in north-central India. The Gandharan figures were partly inspired by provincial Roman images, such as grave portraits produced in Palmyra on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, a trading terminus of the Silk Road. These Gandharan figures wear heavy, toga-like robes and have wavy hair. The figures from north-central India (particularly the city of Mathura) were partly modeled on indigenous Indian male fertility deities and wear cool, lightweight garments.

With the development of the tradition of Mahayana (Greater Vehicle) Buddhism from the beginning of the Common Era onward, the number of sacred Buddhist figures greatly increased. Devotion was focused not only on the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, but also on a growing number of celestial Buddhas and bodhisattvas. (Bodhisattvas are agents of salvation who attend the Buddhas, postponing their own complete emancipation from the world of suffering until they can save all sentient beings.) The celestial Buddhas did not have historical biographies like Shakyamuni but, like Shakyamuni, were embodiments of the wisdom and compassion of the faith. The hierarchy of Buddhism includes many other angelic and guardian figures, all



of whom were represented in painting and sculpture throughout South, Central, East, and Southeast Asia. Cave-temples were often carved out of rock escarpments to house these images in India, on the Central Asian Silk Road routes, and in China. Bamiyan, in Afghanistan, with its (now destroyed) colossal Buddhas was one such site. Another well-known

site, comprising almost 500 cave-temples filled with some 45,000 wall-paintings and thousands of sculptures, is found near the town of Dunhuang in northwest Gansu province. Dunhuang was the first Silk Road oasis trading center within the borders of China proper, and merchants grown wealthy from Silk Road trade were among the patrons of the cave-temples.

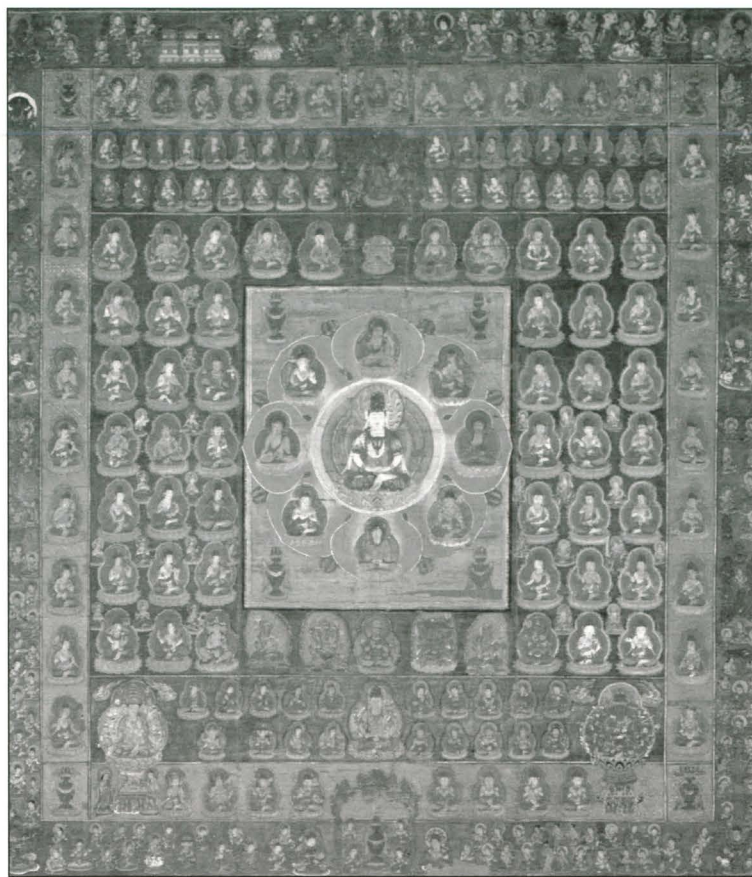
Another visual form associated with Buddhism is the mandala, a representation of an enlightened realm where union between the human and the sacred occurs. Most often, for example in Tibetan Buddhist art or in Japanese Esoteric Buddhist art, the mandala is a circular or square configuration, with a center that radiates outward into compartmentalized areas. The deity at the center of the configuration, who signifies absolute truth, engages in reciprocal interactions with figures in the outer precincts, who signify manifested aspects of that truth. The practitioner unites the outer manifestations in the center of the mandala and then internally absorbs the mandala as a whole.

During and after the 8th century C.E., mandalas were drawn on paper or cloth through all of Asia. These two-dimensional

Fifty-three-meter (175 feet) Buddha at Bamiyan, Afghanistan, ca. 600 C.E. (destroyed 2001). Photograph © John C. Huntington
 Photo courtesy The Huntington Archive of Buddhist and Related Arts

mandalas were hung on temple walls as focal points for veneration, for contemplation, and for rituals, or they were spread out on altar tops for specific ceremonies. A two-dimensional mandala, however, is meant to be transformed into a three-dimensional realm, usually a palatial structure, by means of contemplation and ritual. In their two-dimensional forms, these mandalas often look like architectural ground plans, seen from an aerial viewpoint.

Buddhism was well established in India, Central, East, and Southeast Asia by the 7th century C.E. when another religion, Islam, and its visual images began to spread across Eurasia on Silk Road routes. By the 8th century, just one century after the death of the prophet Muhammad in 632 C.E., Islam had spread from its homeland in Arabia west across Egypt and North Africa to Spain and east to Sasanian Persia. Early Islamic art showed a mixture of Roman, Coptic, Byzantine, and Sasanian styles. Although the holy text of Islam, the Koran (Qur'an), does not prohibit figural images, the non-figural character of Islamic decoration began early, based on traditional theological prohibitions against imitating God's creation. The earliest extant Islamic structure is the Qubbat al-Sakhra (often called the Dome of the Rock by Westerners) in Jerusalem. Built in 691–92 to commemorate the place from which Muhammad is believed to have ascended to heaven, this shrine with its golden dome displays vivid mosaics of scrolling vines, flowers, crowns, and jewel forms in greens, blues, and gold. Sacred calligraphy — writing from the Koran — also adorns this shrine, reflecting the importance of the



Word of God in the Islamic tradition. The Koran was sometimes written in gold script on parchment decorated with floral interlaces. An interesting parallel to this form of sacred writing is found in East Asia where Buddhist scriptures were often written in gold characters

on bluish-purple paper. The Buddhist tradition of sacred writing developed independently but reflected a similar yearning on the part of devotees to sanctify holy utterances with the color gold.

Many other religions were practiced in Silk Road lands — Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Assyrian Christianity, Manichaeism, Confucianism, Daoism, shamanism — but Buddhism and Islam spread most pervasively throughout this region, leaving the greatest imprint on Silk Road culture.

The Silk Road was at its height during the 7th through 9th centuries, when Muslims ruled in West Asia and the Tang dynasty presided over a cosmopolitan culture in China. Various land and sea routes stretched from the shores of the Mediterranean to Japan, the easternmost terminus of Silk Road culture. Ceremonies that took place in the year 752 at the Buddhist monastery of Todaiji in present-day Nara, Japan, provide a vivid testament to the internationalism of Silk Road culture. The occasion was the consecration of an enormous gilt bronze Buddha about 50 feet tall, weighing some 250 tons.

Womb world mandala, Japan, mid-13th century. Gold and color on indigo-dyed silk; hanging scroll; 90.3 x 79 cm. Collection of Sylvan Barnet and William Burto

Paper

by Valerie Hansen

Philosopher-statesman Francis Bacon (1561–1621) identified paper as one of inventions that separated the modern world from the traditional world: the others were the magnetic compass, gunpowder, and printing. He never realized that every one of them originated in China.

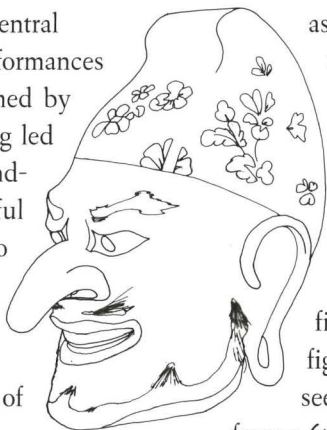
Chinese craftsmen first discovered the secret of making paper when they washed rags and left them out to dry on a screen. This new, flexible material could be used to wrap things, and indeed the first use of paper, in the 2nd century B.C.E., was as a packaging material for medicine. Within a century, paper had begun to displace bamboo strips as China's main writing material, and by the 3rd and 4th centuries C.E. the Chinese used paper for all their writing.

Those in attendance included monks from India, Central Asia, and China. Among the many rituals and performances that took place was a ribald dance-drama performed by masked and costumed dancers. A Chinese lion-dog led the dancing procession. He was followed by a handsome prince from South China and a beautiful Chinese maiden. An ugly, fanged lecher tried to seduce the Chinese lady but was restrained by two fierce, muscular Buddhist guardian deities. Then appeared Garuda, from Indian Hindu and Buddhist mythology, a mythical bird who obtains the elixir of immortality and devours his enemy, the dragon. Garuda was followed by an old Brahmin priest-sage from India and by another elderly figure wearing a Turkish hat. The dancing procession ended with a group of intoxicated, red-faced barbarians and their Persian king. Occasionally the Persian king and his drunken entourage are identified as the Greek god of wine Dionysus and his companions. Most scholars seem to feel, however, that this was really a group of Persians. Probably, for 8th-century Japanese, the distinction between Persians and Greeks was nebulous. They were all “barbarians” from the Western Lands.

Chinese Tang dynasty objects also attest to the cosmopolitanism of the era. Many textiles show Persian motifs, most notably the pearl-encircled roundel with figurative designs such

Chinese paper moved along the Silk Road into Central Asia before the technology of papermaking did. Archaeologists have found paper with Chinese writing on it as far afield as the Caucasus mountains (at the site of Moshchevaya Balka) on an alternate route to Constantinople. Similar paper was in use in the years before 712 at a small fortress on Mount Mugh outside Samarkand. There a local ruler imported Chinese paper that had already been used on one side — so that he could write on the blank reverse when the occasion arose.

From the writing on the back of one sheet of paper found at Mount Mugh we know that it came from Liangzhou, Gansu, an important city on the Chinese silk route, 2,000 miles to the east. Mount Mugh's



as men on rearing horses facing backward to shoot rampant lions or two animals in ritual confrontation with one another. Another West Asian specialty, gold and silver metalwork, was also imported into Tang China. Metal bowls, plates, and cups, decorated with such West Asian motifs as griffins, mouflons, and deer, are found in the graves of the upper classes. These tombs also contain ceramic figures of foreign musicians and dancers. Other figures on horseback — both men and women — seem to be playing polo, a game that may be derived from a 6th-century B.C.E. Persian sport.

In 750, just before that festive consecration of the Great Buddha in Nara, the Muslim Abbasid dynasty established its capital in Baghdad, which became a fabled city of learning. The 9th century saw the building of the Great Mosque of Samarra and the Great Mosque of Cairo. It was during this period that lustre, an opalescent metallic glaze used on ceramics, was developed. The shimmering square lustre tiles set in lozenge patterns on the Great Mosque of Al Qayrawan (ca. 862) are a splendid example.

The 8th century saw the Muslim advance into Central Asia. One of the material results of this conquest was the Muslim adop-

Line drawing of an 8th-century wooden mask representing the drunken Persian king called Suiko-ō. Height of original: 37.7 cm. Shōsō-in Collection, Nara, Japan. Drawing by Linda Z. Ardrey

imported paper was so expensive that the ruler used it only for correspondence. For his ordinary household accounts he used willow sticks, cut from willow branches with the bark removed. Other common writing materials were leather and, in the Islamic world at the time, papyrus.

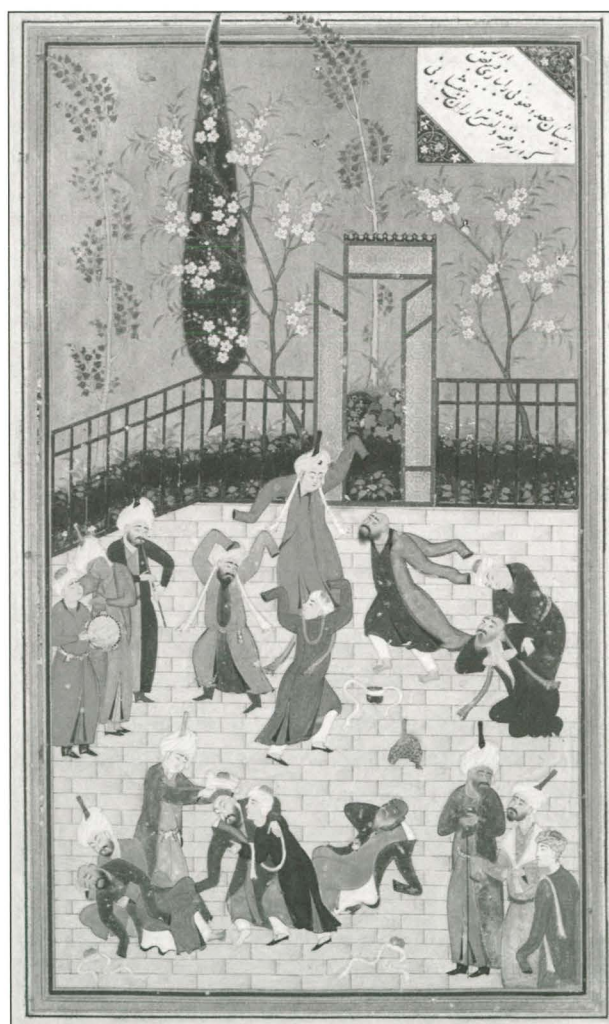
Legend has it that the secret of papermaking entered the Islamic world with the 751 battle of Talas (in modern Kyrgyzstan) when Islamic armies captured several Chinese craftsmen, who taught their captors how to make paper. Most scholars today think the technology, which was not very complex, could have moved out of China into western Iran before 751, though no examples of early, non-Chinese paper survive. Embracing the new technology, the founders of the Abbasid

caliphate (750–1258) sponsored a papermaking factory in Baghdad in 796. Soon all scholars in the Islamic world were copying manuscripts onto paper, which was transmitted to Europe via Sicily and Spain by the 12th century (Bloom 2001).

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tion of paper, a substance that had been developed much earlier in China. Muslims began to transcribe onto paper the knowledge that they had gained from many people — including Greeks, Central Asians, and Indians — and made these pages into books. Paper helped link the Islamic Empire across three continents (Asia, Africa, and Europe), and paper itself, the process of making it, and the knowledge written on it were eventually transmitted to Europe, helping to inspire the European Renaissance.

Another great period for cross-cultural interaction along Silk Road lands was the age of the Mongol Khanate (13th and 14th centuries), when the Polo family traveled from Venice to China and back. In the 13th century the Mongols (Turkic-Mongolian nomads) conquered China and pressed as far west as the Ukraine. They entered Islamic Iran and conquered Baghdad in 1258. Although the Mongols massacred tens of thousands of Muslims, soon many Mongols converted to Islam. Within ten years of their conquests Mongol Muslims were building great mosques and stimulating arts and letters by their patronage. One way they encouraged and transformed the arts in West Asia was by importing Chinese artifacts, artisans, and styles. A group of Chinese workmen directed a papermaking establishment in

Islamic Sufi dance from a manuscript of the Divan by Hafiz, present-day Afghanistan, Herat, dated 1523. Opaque watercolor, gold, and silver on paper; 18.8 x 10.3 cm.

Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.: Purchase F1932.54

Blue-and-White

by Robert McCormick Adams

It is commonly assumed that worldwide technology rivalries and the interdependence of trade are modern developments. But the history of Chinese blue-and-white porcelain and its Middle Eastern, Japanese, European, and New World derivatives challenges this view.

Blue-and-white was traded southward and then westward late in the 14th century (about a hundred years after it was first introduced), although by that time other Chinese export wares were centuries old. They had long moved in both directions between China and the Islamic world (and its antecedents), along the ancient overland Silk Road through Central Asia and in the cargoes of Arab and Persian seafarers. Indirect though it was, this distribution system efficiently communicated back to the Chinese information on the tastes of their Muslim customers.

Meantime, there also developed in the Middle East a wave of cheaper local copies. When they began appealing to customers in their own right, these products no longer needed to be so strictly imitative.

Soon the West got into the act. After a resolute process of exploration at least as consequential in the eyes of contemporaries as the voyages of Columbus, the Portuguese finally rounded the Cape of Good Hope late in the 15th century, opening the Orient to sea trade. Quantities of blue-and-white were being shipped to Lisbon as early as

1530, becoming no less prized in European markets than they were elsewhere.

Once again the Chinese producers were quickly responsive to the changing demands, helped along in this case by painted wooden models that the Dutch sent along with their huge orders.

The Japanese part in all this is equally fascinating. Their taste for blue-and-white did not develop until they had begun to master the technology themselves, which they succeeded in doing about 1600. Not long afterward they made their own entry into world markets. Splendid Dutch records tell a story of massive shipments of Chinese blue-and-white into Japan at first, followed by a Japanese invasion of Southeast Asian and European markets when Chinese production was temporarily interrupted by a civil war. Only in the later part of the 17th century did the Chinese reemerge as competitors. By then the producers of Japanese Imari wares, originally crude and derivative, had developed their own vigorous, indigenous styles for which there was a secure niche in the upper tiers of European and Middle Eastern markets.

Then there is a New World element. Spain came comparatively late to the Pacific by way of the Philippines. Annual shipments of Mexican silver from Acapulco quickly followed, eventually reaching China in quantities sufficient to drive out Manchu paper currency and greatly

Samarkand under Mongol patronage in the 13th and 14th centuries.

Blue-and-white ceramics are a good example of East-West interchange along Silk Road lands during this period. Islamic potters had decorated tin-glazed vessels with cobalt from about the 9th century onward. Muslim merchants in South Chinese coastal cities introduced this ware to China where, in the late 13th century, it was copied by Chinese potters creating high-fired porcelain ware. The white porcelain vessels decorated with cobalt blue designs were then exported to West Asia and to Southeast Asia where they became enormously popular and were copied, although not in high-fired porcelain. A good example of cobalt-decorated ware inspired by the Chinese examples is Turkish stoneware from the Iznik kilns, dating from the late 15th century onward. In the 15th century the Chinese court finally began to patronize blue-and-white porcelain, encouraging domestic production and use of the wares, not just their export.

The importance of the historical Silk Road, with its emphasis on overland routes, declined after the 15th century, when Europeans began to dominate the sea routes connecting Europe, the New World, and Asia. These sea routes increased the ease of travel and the availability of goods. Objects and ideas continued to influence East and West as Westerners adopted Asian fashions and collected Asian objects, and, in turn, Asians developed a taste for Western fashions, food, and technologies. The exchange of objects continues today in the global marketplace at an accelerated rate, with camel caravans and clipper ships replaced by e-commerce and overnight air delivery.

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disrupt the internal economy. The return trade was in silks — and, of course, blue-and-white. Dispersed across Mexico, pieces found their way even to the rude northern frontiers of New Spain. Sherds still turn up from time to time in historic Indian villages along the upper Río Grande, just as they do more frequently along the Arabian coasts.

Initially imitative industries sprang up in northwestern Europe, in Italy, even in Mexico. Out of these, in time, came the splendid tradition of Delftware and the English porcelains that still grace our tables. But what is most interesting is the antiquity as well as the worldwide range of the shifting patterns of supply and demand, stimulus and response. An ebb and flow of technological and trading leadership long antedates the modern era.

ROBERT McCORMICK ADAMS, AN ARCHAEOLOGIST, WAS SECRETARY OF THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION FROM 1984 TO 1994. THIS ARTICLE ORIGINALLY APPEARED IN *SMITHSONIAN MAGAZINE*, MARCH 1986.

Left: Plate. Turkish, Ottoman dynasty, ca. 1500–1525.

Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Center: Dish. Chinese, Yuan dynasty, ca. 1350.

Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Right: Dish. Japanese, Edo period, ca. 1690–1710. Freer Gallery of Art,

Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

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