Beautiful and fascinating—but not urgent?

Monks and Merchants: Silk Road Treasures at the Asia Society in New York

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Monks and Merchants: Silk Road Treasures from Northwest China, Gansu and Ningxia, 4th-7th Century at the Asia Society, New York City, November 17—January 6, 2002

In 138 BC the Chinese Emperor Wudi sent his emissary Zhang Qian north of the Great Wall to make alliances against the Xiongnu, a nomadic people now identified with the Turkic-speaking Huns who were raiding deep into Chinese territory. The Xiongnu held Zhang Qian captive for a decade, but before he returned to China he was able to pass west beyond the Gobi Desert and the Tarim Basin and on to the Pamir Mountains. He reached modern Tajikistan and the Amu Dar'ya (Oxus) River in Turkmenistan bordering what is now Afghanistan.

Zhang encountered peoples previously unknown to the Chinese and gleaned news of advanced cultures further to the south and west, such as India, Persia and the Greco-Roman world. Alexander the Great had conquered as far east as the Oxus almost two centuries earlier, and now two of humanity's most brilliant early class societies, the Chinese and the Hellenic, almost touched each other.

Zhang Qian found that Chinese silk was highly prized in these far-flung states and that silk-making was unknown beyond the Great Wall. When he returned to the Han Dynasty's capital of Changan (present-day Xi'an) news of his discoveries gave rise to a series of trade routes across central Asia that later became known as the Silk Road. Over the next millennium traders led caravans of hundreds of camels carrying silk and other Chinese goods across mountains and deserts to Persia and eventually to Western Europe. In payment, the West, especially Rome, drained itself of silver.

The Silk Road brought into contact many societies, languages, even whole different economic systems that had developed independently of each other for thousands of years. Technology, religions and artistic styles now mingled and diffused across the Eurasian landmass. The stirrup and horse-collar, for example, which played such an important role in medieval European agriculture and warfare, originated in China. The spread of Buddhism from its original home in India to China, Japan and Southeast Asia was a particularly important world-historical development.

Along the way, the Silk Road nourished a flowering of art and literature in Central Asia itself. The ancient peoples of regions such as Afghanistan, Pakistan and the former Soviet Asian republics that today seems so history-less in the mainstream press, were responsible for great cultural achievements. These peoples left a deep imprint on Buddhism and on Chinese society itself. Peoples who had previously been nomadic herders settled down to enjoy the benefits of the silk trade. They built cities, developed their own writing systems, and combined the plastic and visual arts of the great empires to their east and west into their own masterpieces of aesthetic insight.

Monks and Merchants: Silk Road Treasures from Northwest China, Gansu and Ningxia, 4th-7th Century at the Asia Society in New York City gave visitors a chance to sample some of the visual and plastic arts from the fourth to seventh centuries. Nearly all of these came from the eastern Chinese province of Gansu, many on loan from the state-run Gansu Museum.

These "treasures," as the exhibition title calls them, over 120, were largely Buddhist religious objects, although there were some that were used in the daily lives of the people who lived in Gansu or close by in ancient times. There were also traded objects found in Gansu from societies farther to the west. The artifacts were well documented and assumed little prior knowledge on the part of the visitor of the societies that produced them. Unlike many museum exhibitions, the curators provided the information to the viewer in manageable pieces. For example, a small pagoda (Buddhist monument) at the entry of the exhibition had three different cards describing the period of history in which it had been built, what it was used for, etc. There was a welcome absence of specialist jargon. The documentation as a whole facilitated an understanding of the historical context of the artifacts. One could leave the exhibition with a good sense of what, for example, Buddhism was all about. This was a strength in an exhibition that otherwise appeared to ignore the broader cultural needs of many of its viewers.

One of the most stunning series of objects was a set of small bronze statues of horses. Both before and during the period of the Silk Road, horses were vital to the economies of many nomadic peoples in Central Asia. The Chinese themselves had an interest in obtaining the fine Central Asian mounts to establish military parity with the fierce tribes north of the Great Wall. Zhang Qian had discovered the remarkable breed of "blood-sweating" horses from Ferghana near the Pamirs that soon become the favorites of the Chinese cavalry. The statues often represent horses rearing up with their mouths open and nostrils flared; they seem to reproduce something of the spirited nomadic riders of central Asia. The exhibition built on this theme with less idealized figures, such as terra-cotta statues of a herder and his oxen or tomb paintings of similar theme.

This fascination with herd animals was also revealed by work on mythical themes. A bronze unicorn from a Wei-Jin Dynasty (220-317 AD) stands in the Yoga "Lion" position with a heaving chest, looking as though it were about to strike with its horn. This was startlingly

juxtaposed to a carved wooden unicorn in nearly the same position.

There were several collections of figurines (about five to ten centimeters high), representing objects from daily life, such as grain mills, hens sitting on top of chicken coops and Chinese and non-Chinese peoples. Objects like these often had ritual uses in temples or tombs.

The exhibition displayed many examples of art from the famous Buddhist cave temples along the eastern part of the Silk Road, mostly, again, from Gansu province. There were fragments of wall paintings of deities exuding violence and power, in white, green and ocher. Given the age and fragility of the materials, one was unprepared for such vivid colors. The shreds of a Buddhist banner dated to 487 AD stood out. As with other partially destroyed artifacts, a viewer could only speculate about the beauty of the object when intact.

The exhibition displayed a number of almost life-sized statues in bronze, terra cotta and wood, many of Bodhisattvas (Buddhist saints) and monks. The latter figures in particular were sometimes laughing or indicating curiosity on their faces, and reminded one of the realism that the Greeks after Alexander's time had achieved in sculpture. It is well known that Alexander's invasion of India in the fourth century BC and subsequent founding of the Hellenized kingdom of Bactria (in today's Afghanistan) had had a huge impact on Indian sculpture. It was moving to see how this influence continued on into China. There were also statues from tombs, often of the interred. The gilt silver representations of a General Li Xian (d.569 AD) and his wife Wu Hui showed two people, who, for whatever else they were in life, showed grace and elegance in their images after death.

The inflow to China of material from the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire was well-represented. There were gold coins from the reign of the Emperor Justin I (518-527), unearthed at Gansu, and one extraordinary silver ewer from Byzantium (modern Istanbul). This also dated to the sixth century and had embossed on it, in characteristic late-Roman short-limbed figures, three mythological episodes surrounding the Trojan War: the judgment of the Trojan prince Paris by the goddesses Hera, Aphrodite and Athena; Paris's abduction of Helen, the queen of Sparta, to Troy; and the return of Helen to Sparta with her husband Menelaus. It is not unusual that the pagan themes of this ewer were produced after Christianity had become the state religion of Byzantium, but it is interesting. The fact that it reached China and pleased its collector there speaks to the universality of much of ancient art. One wonders if the Chinese owner had had this oldest Greek myth explained to him or her.

Finally, the exhibition took special note of the influence on China of at least one central Asian people: the Sogdians. Sogdia was a region mightily stimulated by the Silk Road in what is now Uzbekistan. The Sogdians, who spoke a language related to Persian, built Samarkand, one of the greatest trading cities of the route. Sogdians became some of the most important middle-men in trade between China and Persia, and many Sogdians settled in Gansu. The exhibition displayed a letter written by a Sogdian agent in Gansu named Nanai-vandak in the summer of 313 AD, to his colleagues in Samarkand. The exhibition featured as well a number of artifacts detailing the absorption of Sogdians into Chinese society.

The place of the Sogdians in Asian history summed up the perspective of the exhibition as a whole: the Silk Road had a tremendous impact on Chinese culture, particularly as it was represented in Gansu province. The exhibition notes refer to the "cosmopolitanism" and even "internationalism" of Chinese society at the height of the Silk Road trade during the Tang Dynasty (618-907). Particularly in its Buddhist objects, the curators clearly meant to show that the Silk Road stimulated a cultural interchange, which at least on the Chinese side was deep-seated and enduring. In itself this is correct: a meld of cultures would have been no secret to the people of the Tang, at least those from the upper classes. At the imperial academy in Changan Chinese would meet Indians, Sogdians, Vietnamese or Japanese, and numerous other ethnicities.

There was, however, little material at the exhibition that explained what sorts of societies interacted. Were there social classes in Sogdia? Who did the everyday work? Did the cities of the Silk Road subsist only on trade? (There was some mention of innovations in irrigation techniques that affected central Asia.) Most importantly, the exhibition nowhere asked whether such a vast cultural interchange transformed the basic economic roots of Chinese society. Raising such questions would have added a good deal to the visitor's understanding of how the art of the Silk Road was produced and how it influenced the culture of China.

And there are other issues which, given the present artistic and intellectual climate, are perhaps inevitable but nonetheless deserve to be raised. The exhibition tended to leave one with the sense that the sculpture, the cave paintings, the tomb remains were distant in time, known and only of interest to a few experts, and, of course, to the viewer let in on the Silk Road curiosity. The curators appear to have forgotten that peoples with long and spectacular histories live today in the former Soviet Asian republics, in Afghanistan and in the west of China. The Asia Society offered an Asia of precious delicacy in a setting of intellectual privilege. The absence of historical perspective left the spectator feeling a lack of interconnectedness between past and present. The exhibition felt more like a refresher course for aficionados of Asian art than an experience intended for first-, second- or third-time viewers of Silk Road artifacts.

Given the present level of cultural and historical knowledge among Americans (including professional artists in New York), by severing the Silk Road from the reality of central Asian and Chinese peoples today, the exhibition failed to perform an essential and urgent service.

Some of the objects on display at the exhibition can be seen at:
http://www.askasia.org/teachers/Instructional_Resources/FEATURES/SilkRoad/slides