

MONKS AND MERCHANTS

Silk Road Treasures
from Northwest China

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*Gansu and Ningxia,
4th–7th Century*



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WITH ESSAYS BY

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Foreword

The exhibition and catalogue *Monks and Merchants: Silk Road Treasures from Northwest China, Gansu and Ningxia, 4th–7th Century*, tells, from the perspective of China, the story of far-flung cultural and mercantile communication that saw people, religious faiths, and luxury goods move with unprecedented freedom between the continent's diverse civilizations. Along the network of routes that linked China, Central Asia, India, and Europe, now known popularly as the "Silk Road," myriad luxury goods were traded, yet this was not merely a network of trade routes; side by side with merchants traveled missionaries and pilgrims, spreading new religious beliefs and ethical codes. Of these, it was Buddhism, introduced around the turn of the first millennium, that was to have the most far-reaching and profound influence.

Unlike previous exhibitions of Silk Road art, *Monks and Merchants* focuses on a particular region, one that played a crucial role in this traffic of ideas and luxuries. This region, comprising the present-day province of Gansu and the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, constituted the gateway to China and the only section of the Silk Road within China proper. Gansu and Ningxia were thus a melting pot where exotic and indigenous traditions intermingled and cross-fertilized. The resulting richness and diversity of artifacts and styles are fully represented by the works in this exhibition and catalogue.

More than a century ago, when Western scholars and collectors began to take a serious interest in the arts of Asia, it was the "exotic" appearance of the works, differentiated from Western art, that appealed to them. Now, as we move into the new millennium, neither Asia nor Asian art can be seen only in terms of differences. *Monks and Merchants* is intended to remind us that cross-cultural exchanges and connections are an integral part of the world we call "Asia." The choice of *Monks and Merchants: Silk Road Treasures from Northwest China, Gansu and Ningxia, 4th–7th Century* to celebrate the opening of the Asia Society's refurbished headquarters and new exhibition spaces (to be named Asia Society Museum) is thus particularly appropriate.

The story in this exhibition—of relationships among cultures and societies through trade and religion rather than through military conquests—has a powerful message for the new millennium: that we cannot live in isolation and rule by military might. It also suggests new avenues for the exploration of the ever-complex world of Asian arts.

Many people have contributed to the successful realization of this exhibition and catalogue. I would like to express my profound gratitude to the curators and catalogue authors of *Monks and Merchants*, Professor Annette L. Juliano and Dr. Judith A. Lerner, who first recognized the potential of Gansu and Ningxia for an exhibition of Silk Road art. I would also like to thank members of the scholarly advisory committee and catalogue contributors—Michael Alram, Susan Beningson, Chen Bingying, Albert E. Dien, Luo Feng, Colin Mackenzie, Boris I. Marshak, Julie Segraves, Nicholas Sims-Williams, and Zhang Guangda.

The Asia Society is also indebted to the many Chinese officials and scholars who have supported the project: the Honorable Sun Jiazheng, Minister for Culture; Madam Meng Xiaosi, Vice-Minister; Vice-Minister Zhang Wenbin, Director General of the State Administration of Cultural Heritage; Ms. Wang Limei, Director of the Foreign Affairs Office; Vice-Minister Zhao Qizheng of The State Council Information Office; and Ambassador Li Daoyu. The Honorable Joseph W. Prueher, United States Ambassador to China, provided invaluable advice at a critical stage in the negotiations.

In Gansu, Vice-Governor Li Chongan has expressed unwavering support for the exhibition. Mr. Ma Wenzhi, Vice Director of the Cultural Department and Director of the Administration of Cultural Heritage, provided overall direction of the project in Gansu, while day-to-day organization was ably supervised by Mr. He Yangzhou, Vice Director of the Administration of Cultural Heritage, Mr. Tsu Shibin, former Director of the Gansu Provincial Museum, and Mr. Han Bowen, Interim Director.

Additionally, I would like to thank Madam Fan Jinshi, Director of the Dunhuang Research Academy, Mr. Wang Hengtong, Director of the Binglingsi Grottos, and Mr. Hua Pingning of the Maijishan Caves Research Institute for agreeing to the very special loans from their respective sites. I would also like to thank Mr. Hua and Mr. Zhang Guangtian of the Gansu Provincial Museum for their photography for the catalogue.

In Ningxia, we are greatly indebted to Mr. Wang Bangxiu, Director of the Cultural Department, Mr. Xue Yaping, Deputy Director of the Cultural Department, Mr. Lei Runze, Vice-Director of the Administration of Cultural Heritage, Mr. Luo Feng, former Director of the Guyuan Museum and now Director of the Ningxia Institute of Archaeology, and Mr. Chen Kun, Director of the Guyuan Museum, have coordinated the project with efficiency and enthusiasm.

Monks and Merchants and its associated programs would not have been possible without the support of a large group of generous donors. I would like to make special mention of our lead corporate sponsor, J. P. Morgan Chase & Company. Crucial additional support came from The W. L. S. Spencer Foundation, The Starr Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, The Henry Luce Foundation Inc., the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Very early on members of the Friends of Asian Arts, a membership group for the Cultural Programs Division of the Asia Society, decided to learn about this exciting region and joined us for a study trip. They formed a group called "Gansu Dotcom" and provided early support for the project.

Many members of the staff of the Asia Society contributed to the success of this exhibition: Colin Mackenzie, Associate Director and Curator; Helen Abbott, Exhibitions and Publications Manager; Amy McEwen, Registrar; Nancy Blume, Education Coordinator; Clare Savard, Exhibitions Coordinator; Josh Harris, Galleries Associate; Chae Ho Lee, Graphics Designer; Mirza Burgos, Melissa Buyum, Sunny Huang, and Kaoru Ishizaki contributed their able administrative support; and Neil Liebman lent his editorial expertise.

Rachel Cooper and Linden Chubin of the Cultural Programs Division have developed an exciting array of performances and lectures that enhance the concept of cross-cultural interchange embodied in the exhibition. I would also like to thank Karen Karp and Heather Steliga, who have presented the multifaceted themes of *Monks and Merchants* in a way that has engaged audiences from the Asian American communities. The Development staff of the Asia Society who worked to secure the financial support for the project include Carol P. Herring, Yun Won Cho, and Atteqa Ali.

In conclusion, I want to express my deep gratitude to Nicholas Platt, President of the Asia Society, for his generous and profoundly important support for this often complex and always compelling project.

VISHAKHA N. DESAI

Senior Vice President

Director of the Galleries and Cultural Programs

Asia Society