

TRANSCULTURATION

A Pedagogical Approach to Asian Art

By Ileana B. Leavens

One of my concerns as an art history instructor at Seattle Central Community College has been how to communicate effectively with students of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds whose art history knowledge ranges from non-existent to sophisticated. Even those somewhat conversant with art historical issues are not familiar with the contributions other cultures have provided world art and architecture.

In 1993 I introduced Art 255, initially called Survey of Non-Western Art, which included Asia, then renamed Survey of Asian Art as my interest in Asia gradually increased. In the process, Sherman Lee's *History of Far Eastern Art* replaced the series of texts hitherto used.¹ However, the basic problem remained, since the pendulum had swung from one extreme to another. As Asian studies replaced the emphasis on Western art, I felt that a more balanced approach was needed. The transculturation model satisfied this need.

The concept of transculturation is not new; Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz introduced it in his seminal book *Contrapunteo Cubano del Tabaco y el Azucar* (Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar).² Ortiz used transculturation to explain how tobacco was transmitted from the Americas to Africa and Europe, and how in exchange Columbus introduced sugar into the New World during his second voyage. This trade gave rise to cultural transformations not only in these three areas but also in Asia, particularly in China, Japan, and the Philippines. The key word in Ortiz's book is *Contrapunteo*, meaning counterpoint: a dialogue between two or more musical instruments. This may take shape as variations on a theme or as interactions between different melodies. Applying this metaphor in general, transculturation means a multi-level exchange between two or more actively-engaged cultures, superseding the traditional concepts of assimilation and influences, thereby providing a more realistic approach to worldwide studies. This process may go through several phases: transmission, acceptance/modification, and reply. In the musical example, the first phase corresponds to the introduction of the melodic theme, the second to its repetition and/or variations by other instruments or the introduction of a new theme. Considering the temporal character of music, the second phase and reply are identical.

The transculturation process is different for the fine arts (including architecture) as they are visual expressions of particular societies and their changing attitudes, ideas, and beliefs, no matter how diverse these might be. In art and architecture, shapes, materials, and styles reflect these changes. One of the objectives in the course is to relate art and architecture to the social, economic, and political developments that took place in the societies being studied, and indicate how these events affected the artists' views and sensitivities.³ Art and architecture are in fact primary sources for cultural

studies at both local and global levels. Considering the breadth and complexity of the course, I have chosen to introduce a pedagogical approach that combines Sherman Lee's text for local developments, with examples where the transculturation model is applicable. Three have been selected for this paper: the Silk Road, Japan's Ashikaga/Momoyama period (1392–1615), and late nineteenth to early twentieth century interactions between Japan and Europe. The first will be considered in some detail to emphasize the historical/geographical approach taken and which can also be applied to the other two examples.

Historically, the Silk Road developed as a result of two sets of events: the first was the rise of Achaemenian Persia in sixth century BCE in present day Iran and its conquests of territories lying both to the west and east of its capital, Persepolis (fig. 1). The surviving art and architecture of the city reflect both Persian eclecticism as well as territorial expansions through war and trade. Persepolis, founded by Darius I in 518 BCE, was impressive not only for its size but also for its architecture, which included numerous fluted columns, some of which still stand. As the earliest examples of fluting are Egyptian,⁴ it may have been introduced into Persia when Cambyses invaded Egypt in 525 BCE; but the Ionian Greek settlements (in Attica, Euboea, most of the Aegean islands, and the central coast of Asia Minor) provide a better alternative: first, their presence at the Persian court has been documented, and second, the Persepolis columns support capitals that include volutes: these are characteristic of the Greek Ionic order (fig. 2). Furthermore, an Aeolian capital from Larissa circa 600 BCE may be a prototype. Aeolia was the ancient name for the northwest coastal region of Asia Minor (fig. 3).⁵ (Compare figures 2 and 3). However the volutes in the Persian capital are repeated, twice facing downwards and twice facing upwards. This creates a highly decorative pattern. The repetition of a motif for decorative purposes is typical of Persian art (fig. 4).

Under Darius and his son Xerxes, the Persian Empire was at its height, extending from Asia Minor to the Indus Valley. However, the Ionian Greeks in the central coast area of Asia Minor were not satisfied being under Persian control and in 499–94 rebelled but lost. Those that survived the initial massacre were sent into exile to the Persian satrapy at Gandhāra, India (now Pakistan and Afghanistan). As it was Persian policy to allow the continuation of cultural traditions and religious beliefs of those she had conquered, three art styles coalesced in Gandhāra: Greek, Persian, and Indian. In addition, during Darius' time, an opposite flow was also taking place. In his book *Cultural Flow Between China and the Outside World Throughout History*, Shen Fuwei indicates that at least two waves of cultural exchange between China and Persia, in which Chinese silk made its way to the west, took place prior to the "official" opening of the Silk

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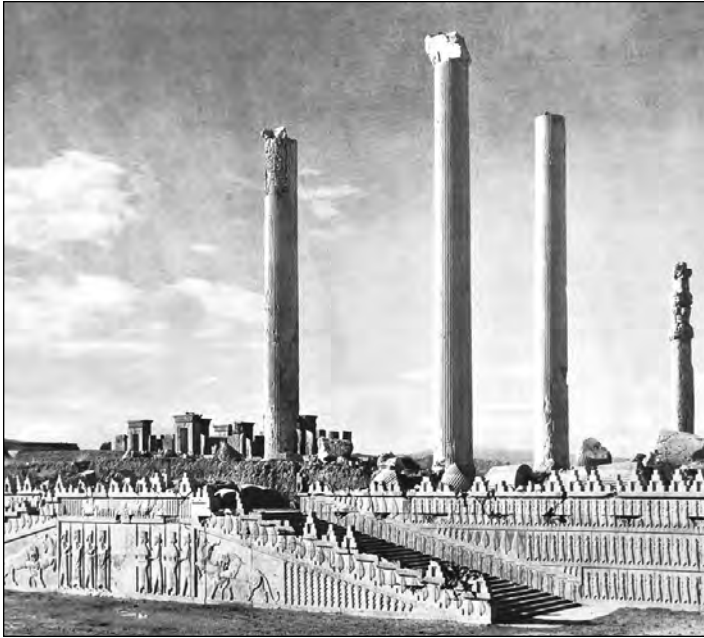


FIGURE 1: Audience Hall of Darius and Xerxes, Persepolis. Source: H. W. Janson and Anthony F. Janson, *History of Art*, revised sixth edition, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education, 2004, fig. 3–26, page 87.



FIGURE 2: Temple of Athena Nike, Acropolis, Athens showing Ionic volutes. Source: Janson, fig. 5–36, page 133.



FIGURE 3: Aeolian Ionic capital. Source: Janson, fig. 5–37, page 134.



FIGURE 4: Capital from Persepolis (Janson). Source: Janson, fig. 3–27, page 87.

Road during the Han Dynasty. The first was during Darius' reign, and silk may have reached Greece; the second was under Alexander the Great.⁶ In 330 BCE Persepolis fell to Alexander, and four years later, after crossing the Indus River, he entered Gandhāra, determined to conquer territories the Persians had ruled. According to Shen Fuwei, the cultural exchange with both Darius and Alexander took place on the western slopes of the Kulun and Tianshan mountain ranges, which frame the southern and northern borders of the Tarim

basin. This area was to play a crucial role in the “official” Silk Road. In return, silk traveled west along the continental steppe.⁷

After Alexander's death the empire was partitioned among his generals and the eastern territories fell to Seleucus I (Nikator), whose command did not last long. Challenged by the Indian Chandragupta Maurya, Seleucus was defeated in 305 BCE, and forced to cede several of the Greek satrapies under his control. Far to the east, Chandragupta (circa 322–298) reigned from his capital at Patalipu-



FIGURE 5: Capital from Pataliputra, India, Mauryan, third century BCE. Source: Roy C. Craven, *Indian Art*, revised edition (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), fig. 19, page 42.



FIGURE 6: Lion capital from Sarnath. Source: Craven, fig. 16, page 35.



FIGURE 7: Rhyton, Achaemenid, fifth and third centuries BC. Source: Janson, fig. 3–29, page 88.

tra along the banks of the Ganges, and by this time the volutes first associated with Achaemenian Persia and Greece had traveled there: a capital from the city is an Indian interpretation of Hellenic and Persian motifs (fig. 5).⁸ These examples illustrate the stylistic variations that took place as the volute traveled from the coast of Asia Minor to India. They are visual counterparts to the first two phases of the melodic metaphor; they also constitute primary sources for the study of historical events: this last concept is basic to the transculturation model.

The Achaemenian presence in Indian architecture continued under Chandragupta's grandson Ashoka (273–232 BCE). Converted to Buddhism, out of remorse for the slaughter of his enemy the Kalingas, he undertook a series of Buddhist columns topped by animal capitals. The most famous is the lion capital at Sarnath, circa 250 BCE, in which the lion's head closely resembles that in an Achaemenian rhyton (ancient drinking vessel shaped like a horn or animal's head) of the same motif. Characteristic to both is the decorative treatment of the lion's body (Compare figures 6 and 7.). The transformation of a naturalistic motif into a decorative pattern is characteristic of Persian art.

The Parthians, nomadic tribes of Persian origin, succeeded the Seleucids in 238 BCE; one hundred years later the Parthian empire extended on the west from the Euphrates to Afghanistan, though nomadic tribes arriving from the east and Rome in the west menaced its borders.⁹ The empire, however, lasted until 224 CE, when the last Parthian king was overthrown, and his governor Ardushir founded the Sassanian Empire; this in turn lasted until it fell to the Arabs in 651 CE.¹⁰ Ardushir's son, Shapur I, proved to be as ambitious as Darius had been, and in his conflicts with Rome for territorial expansion defeated three Roman emperors: Gordian III, Phillip the Arab and Valerian. The event, commemorated in a monumental relief at Nakish-I Rostam near Persepolis, shows Shapur I triumphing over Phillip and Valerian (260–72 CE). The relief is important

for three reasons: it's a historical record, its composition similar to that of a relief in the Arch of Titus, but the flattening of the figures and the decorative treatment of the drapery folds is Persian (Compare figures 8 and 9.).

The treatment of drapery folds as pattern, traceable to Achaemenian Persia, had appeared earlier during the Kushan period,

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FIGURE 8: Shapur I Triumphant over the Roman Emperors Philip the Arab and Valerian AD 260–72, Naksh-e Rostam (near Persepolis). Source: Janson, fig. 3–30, page 89.



FIGURE 9: Triumph of Titus (Relief in passageway, Arch of Titus), 81 AD Source: Janson, fig. 7–36, page 195.

late first century to third century CE, when eastern Iranian people from Central Asia settled in northwest and north-central India, an area that bordered at its northwest frontier with Gandhāra. As Buddhist sculpture developed from an-ionic to iconic images, we find at Gandhāra a merging of Persian and classical motif which is to be expected from the numerous contacts Gandhāra had with the Mediterranean world.¹¹ An excellent example of this stylistic superposition is seen in the standing Bodhisattva, second century, now at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the decorative treatment of the garment is Persian, but the representation of the knee as seen under the cloth is of Greco-Roman origin (see figure 10). This piece is an example of transculturation.¹²

Gandhāran art spread east along both south and north rims of the Tarim basin, from one oasis town to another (see figure 11). Their international character can be seen in Buddhist mural paintings from grottoes such as those at Kizil and Bezeklik. At Bezeklik, for example, paintings include images of Persian, Indian, and Chinese travelers. The Chinese presence there indicates that the second set of events leading to the “official” Silk Road had taken place. Its origins can be traced to the threat of nomadic tribes from the north on Chinese borders, which led to Shih Huang Di’s consolidation of China and to the Great Wall, but the threat continued and by the Han dynasty it was necessary to introduce faster and stronger horses into

Chinese armies. China’s missions to western lands in search of these horses, in return for silk, were the beginning of the “official” Silk Road. But the trade’s vitality depended on the route’s safety, and the northern trade was the more exposed to nomadic threat. It was only during the first century BCE that the Chinese succeeded in occupying eastern Turkestan and areas in the northern rim of the basin. Out of this cultural mixture a new style emerged, which archaeologist Sir Aurel Stein (1862–1943) called “serindian”, the word ser referring to “Seres” (China). They are products of transculturation (see figure 12.).¹³

As the Chinese presence continued to spread farther west, silk arrived in India, the Persian territories of Bactria and Parthia, and as far as present day Iran and Syria. By 200 CE, trade was carried by land and sea, and extended from Japan to Rome, including Africa, the Near East, India, South East Asia, Korea, and Japan (see figure 13).

The geographical situation of Persia allowed her to control the Silk Road trade, on one hand extracting payment from merchants that entered Persian territory and on the other exporting Persian goods. For example, Sassanian ware went to Constantinople and the Christian west, and to China and Japan, where the initial style was modified to suit existing tastes. In his book *The Silk Road and the Shōsō-in*, Ryoichi Hayashi illustrates how a Persian ewer of bird-like appearance inspired regional production. The Persian example is made of metal and the bird is very abstract; the Chinese example is a three-color glaze ceramic, characteristic of the Tang, with a more representational style head (figs. 14 and 15). A third version is more remarkable: Persian in style, it is made of bamboo, covered with cloth, and painted with lacquer (fig. 16).¹⁴ What role did Japan play in the trade? As recorded in Chinese Dynastic Histories, contacts with China took place through Korea, and these were of diplomatic character, but they also indicate that Japan essentially paid tribute to China; these included slaves, gems, carved jade, and brocade.¹⁵ In turn Korea paid tribute to Japan, who for a time had military supremacy there. Japan’s subservience to China is confirmed by an account circa 513 CE in which four consecutive Japanese rulers asked the Chinese court to confirm their titles.¹⁶ After Japan ceased sending envoys, contacts with China continued via the Maritime Silk Road, in which Japan was linked to the eastern Chinese port of Ningbo; between 839 and 907, thirty-seven ships were registered in this route. However all ships for this trade were built by Chinese workmen using Chinese or Japanese shipyards.¹⁷ In terms of the musical metaphor, cultural relations between China, Korea and Japan can be seen as follows: China provided the initial theme (first phase), and Korea and Japan either repeated or modified it in different ways (second phase).

It was not until the Heian period (794–1185 CE) that a purely Japanese art began to emerge with the *fusuma* or sliding screen and the beginnings of the Japanese decorative style of painting. Screens had been introduced into Japan via Korea, but these were single and folding screens. Screens are first mentioned in the Nihongi under an entry dated 686 CE listing a tribute from Silla.¹⁸ The *fusuma* is a Japanese invention of the Heian period.¹⁹ Screens functioned as decorated walls and partitions, and the earlier ones were modeled after Chinese paintings; but with increasing wealth of the aristocracy came increasing luxury: a highly decorative style developed, and by

the Ashikaga period gold was combined with rich colors, at first sparingly and finally as background.²⁰

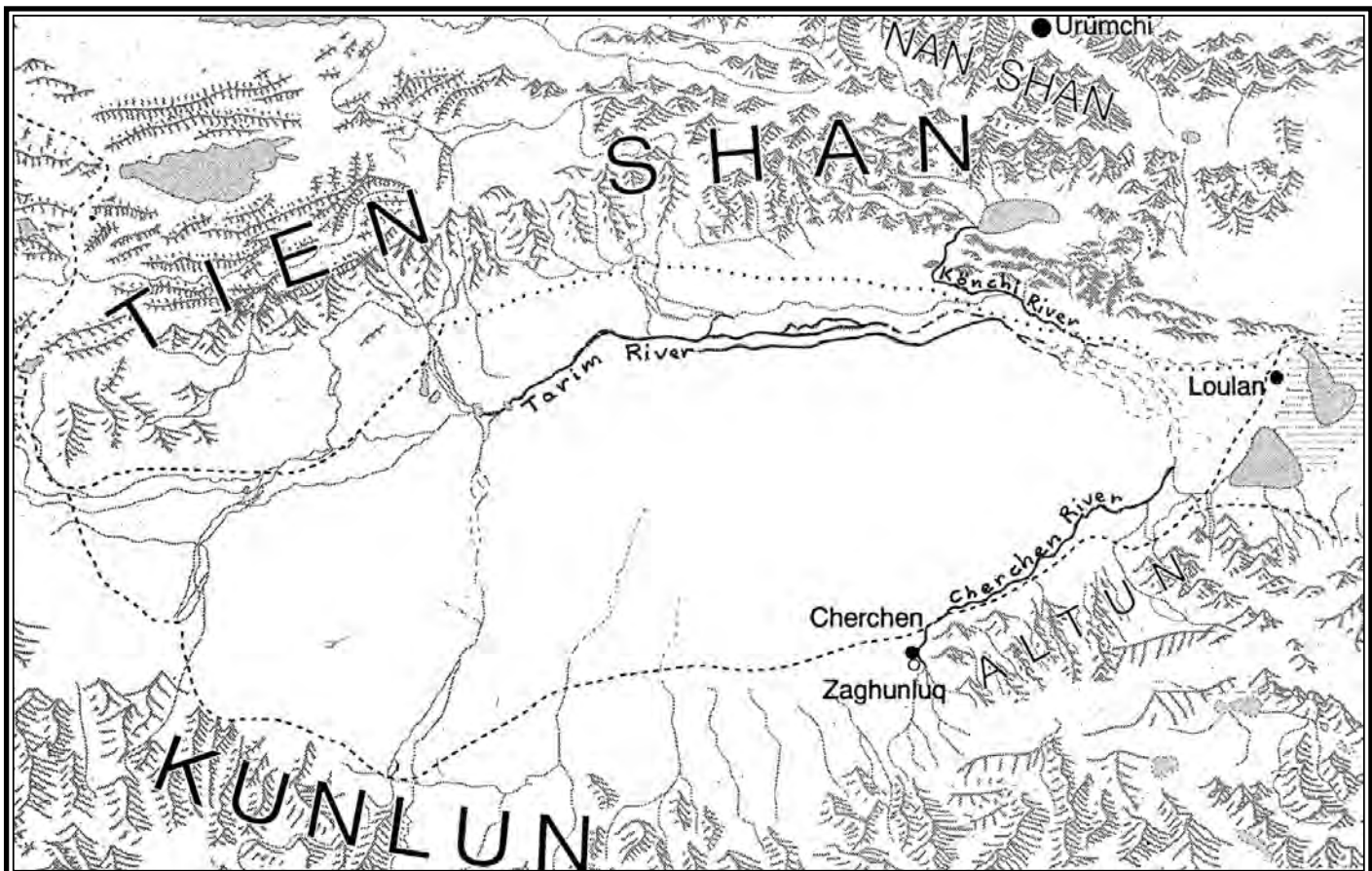
When after a hiatus of almost five hundred years, shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu in 1404 renewed official missions to China, trade revived, Japan exporting the curved swords of the medieval period (which were in great demand throughout East Asia), screens, and painted folding fans (a Japanese invention).²¹

During late Momoyama period and early Edo, folding screens appeared in Europe and Mexico. The background history leading to this event begins with the presence of Portuguese traders and missionaries in Japan in 1549. Their presence led to the creation of a new art, *Namban*, or art of the Southern barbarians as the Portuguese were called. Some folding screens combine gold backgrounds and flat images, but the subject matter is western, showing Portuguese traders and missionaries as well as African servants accompanying them; others introduce western perspective and modeling. When the initial welcome gave way to religious persecution, Christianized Japanese fearing for their lives fled Japan in 1618, and reached Mexico via Manila. Settling in Puebla, they produced folding screens, which became very popular. They even had an impact on language: the Japanese word for screen is *byōbu*; the Spanish one is *biombo*. The Asian presence in Mexico, which included the Chinese, added to native, African, and European cultures, led Colin M. MacLachlan and Jaime E. Rodriguez to consider the country a place where a cosmic race was forged.²² But as after 1639 Edo Japan entered a period of seclusion, the transculturation process was



FIGURE 10: Standing Bodhisattva, Gandhāra region, second century CE. Source: Sherman E. Lee, *A History of Far Eastern Art*, fifth edition (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated and New Jersey: Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, Incorporated, 1994), fig. 142, page 108.

FIGURE 11: Map of Tarim Basin. Source: Elizabeth Wayward Barber, *The Mummies of Ürümchi* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1999), map 2.1, page 22.



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FIGURE 12:

Bezeklik painting in serindian style.

Source: Peter Hopkins, *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road: The Search for the Lost Cities and Treasures of Chinese Central Asia*, (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), illustration 13.

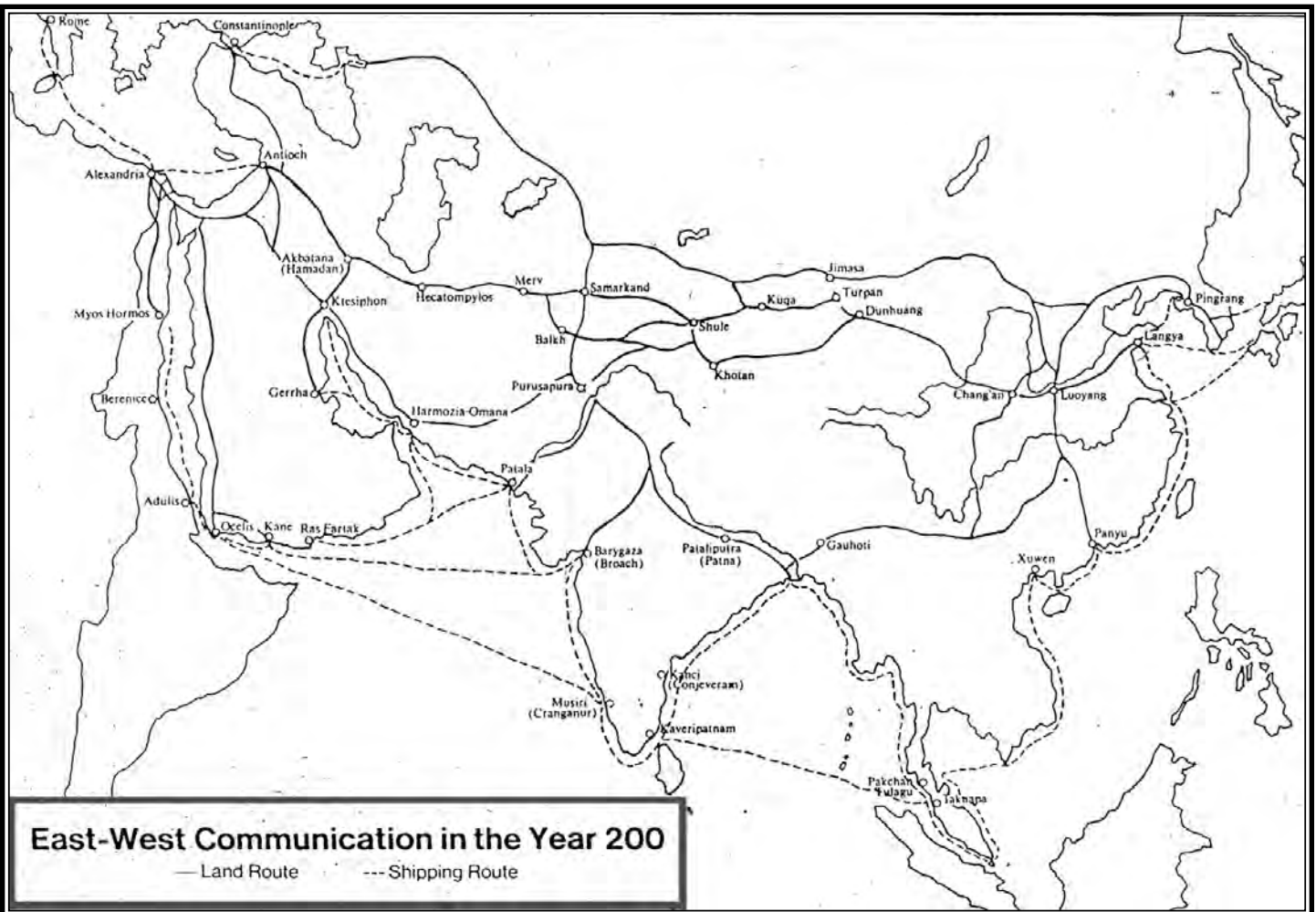
Figure 13:

Map of Silk Road circa 200 CE.

Source: Shen Fuwei, *Cultural Flow Between China and the Outside World Throughout History* (Beijing, China: Foreign Languages Press, 1996)

virtually stopped. It was only in the mid-nineteenth century when Japan was forced to open its doors to the west that full-scale transculturation was born. In art, the best-known example is the impact of *Japonisme* in European art (impressionism and post-impressionism) and in the United States (also including photography and architecture) and a corresponding westernization of Japanese art, architecture, and photography from late nineteenth century until 1941. As there is a wealth of information available on the different aspects of this topic, that is, the presence of Japanese artists in Europe during late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the corresponding presence of western artists and architects in Japan, I leave the reader to peruse selected examples of his/her choice as my main interest in writing this paper is to present a pedagogical method, not to write a textbook.

These examples clearly indicate that the study of other societies needs to be approached in more than a personal, selective, perspective that tends to impose the observer's viewpoint. As transculturation has now achieved global dimensions, the Western linear perspective hitherto used to study "the other" fails to provide a rational view of a reality in which the "us" is also "the other." In Art 255, the examples selected, simple as they are by comparison to present-day situations, provide the opportunity to teach transculturation as a process, (not merely a compilation of information or knowledge) that can be applied to many other disciplines within and outside the arts.





Left to right:

FIGURE 14: Persian bird headed ewer. Source: Ryoichi Hayashi, *The Silk Road and the Shōsō-in*, translated by Robert Ricketts (New York: Weatherhill, 1975) Color plate 73.

FIGURE 15: Tang bird headed ewer. Source; Hayashi, Color plate 74.

FIGURE 16: Persian style bird headed ewer, made of lacquer over bamboo frame. Source: Hayashi, Color plate 72.


But using transculturation as a simple exchange does no justice to the model, and even worse, gives a superficial view of history. In teaching the arts of Asia, it is therefore necessary to deal also with the internal developments taking place in the areas under consideration, before the transculturation model can be applied. Thus the primary text is crucial in providing the needed information on which to base the study of art and aesthetics in relation to historical, economic, and social developments and even in connection to other arts. A more holistic approach is provided by some knowledge of Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and Shintō, which are basic for iconography. All tests have three sections: identification, comparison and contrast, and essay. For the essay part of the mid-term and final, students are required to do independent research on any topic of their choice as long as it's related to Asia. Essays for the quizzes are in-class writings and are based on the text and lectures. Another required paper is museum writing based on the student's reaction to one object selected from the Seattle Asian Art Museum, or a Seattle gallery displaying Asian art. The purpose of this paper is to train students to look and see art in the original, to react to the colors, texture, forms, and/or composition that have made it an appealing object. Illustrations from magazines or books are not acceptable. Students are also required to do an art project (painting, drawing, print, collage, computer art, musical composition, poem, or performance) inspired by a subject(s) associated with the course. The projects are graded on imagination, not technique, since purely technical competence is not the issue. Their importance rests on opening students to the arts as a means of communication in which creativity is stressed.

The transculturation model can also be used in Coordinated Studies Programs in which two or more faculty members teach a given subject from their different disciplines. The CSP format introduces many possibilities for a holistic study of Asia. The variety of subjects that can be considered and the diversity of approaches fac-

ulty members and students bring forward, provide a solid foundation of knowledge. Art 255 is essentially a first step in this direction. ■

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NOTES

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4. Fluting appears in King Zoser's pyramid complex, Saqqara Egypt, circa 2681–2662 BCE.
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10. Janson, 89.
11. Mario Bussagli, *L'Art Gandhāra*, translated by Béatrice Arnal (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1996) is an excellent study of Gandhāra art.
12. I propose that the increasing patterning of folds, which appears in Roman sculpture, beginning circa second century CE and continuing until the fourth, may also be traced to Persia.
13. Peter Hopkirk, *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road: The Search for the Lost Cities and Treasures of Chinese Central Asia* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1984) is a very readable account of the archaeological expeditions that were sent to the area during the early part of the twentieth century.
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17. Shen Fuwei, 154.
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