

# My Personal Experience of East–West Cultural Exchange

*Ikuo Hirayama*

On 6 August 1945, I was exposed to radiation in Hiroshima during the atomic bombing. At that time I was 15 years old, a third-year junior high school student, and working at a factory in Hiroshima under the wartime student mobilization plan. A total of 201 people from my school (13 teachers and 188 students) were killed outright in the bombing. I narrowly escaped death, but suffered from radiation sickness for many years afterwards. At one point, my white blood cell count dropped sharply, endangering my life.

When I chose painting as my vocation, I decided to put on canvas my prayer for world peace that stems from my experience in Hiroshima. In 1959, I painted *Arrival of Buddhism*, a picture depicting the 17-year-long journey to India of Xuanzang (600–664), a Chinese priest during the Tang Dynasty, in search of enlightenment. This work made my name known as a painter among the general public.

My idea for *Arrival of Buddhism* came from a newspaper article. Following the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome, Tokyo was chosen as the host city for the 1964 Games. One newspaper column commented that it would be interesting if the Silk Road were selected as part of the course for the Olympic torch relay from Athens to Tokyo, expressing the author's hope that, if the relay passed along the Chinese section of the Silk Road, peace would come to East Asia. China was a closed country in those days, and had no diplomatic ties with Japan. Reading this newspaper column, I recalled that Buddhism had arrived in Japan via the Silk Road, and that Xuanzang had traveled that same road on his pilgrimage to India.

Founded in 618, the Tang Dynasty forbade travel to the West until the dynasty's political position had stabilized. Despite these restrictions, Xuanzang embarked on his solitary journey to India in 629, with no prior knowledge of that country.

In order to extend salvation to the masses, Xuanzang had decided to leave China on a truth-seeking journey, even if this meant violating the State's interdict. It was the courageous way in which Xuanzang lived his life that inspired me to put my own prayers for peace on canvas.

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Xuanzang returned to Changan, an ancient capital of China, in 645. He translated the Buddhist Sutras from Sanskrit into Chinese, a task that took him 20 years to complete. Xuanzang also wrote a historically important book, *Records of the Western Regions of the Great Tang Dynasty*, in which he presents a rich diversity of information about seventh-century India and Central Asia. Xuanzang's deeds also exerted a strong influence on the people of ancient Japan.

After reading the newspaper column mentioned above, I became keenly interested in the Silk Road, the ancient roots of Japanese culture and channel for East–West cultural exchange. As a recipient of the first UNESCO Fellowship for Art, I was able to study in Europe in 1962 and 1963. Here I made comparative studies of eastern fine arts and western religious arts, represented by Italian Renaissance and French Romanesque styles, as well as studying modern art. I visited several famous European museums, including the British Museum, the Louvre Museum, the Berlin Museum, and the Vatican Museum. I studied the civilizations of the Eurasian Continent, comparing the cultures of the East, Middle East and West.

Then in 1968, I traveled to India, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Pakistan, tracing the path of Buddhism's eastward diffusion and the roads traveled by Xuanzang.

Buddhism was founded around the fifth century BC in India, from which it spread to various Asian countries, arriving in Japan from the Korean Peninsula in 538. It took 1000 years for this religion to reach Japan from its origins in India. Dozens of times, I have walked along this path by which Buddhism spread: from India, through Central Asia to China, the Korean Peninsula and, finally, Japan. In India, however, the influences of Persian, Hellenistic and Roman civilization can also be observed. Tracing the course of Buddhism's expansion eastward, a cultural continuum connecting the eastern and western ends of the Eurasian Continent becomes apparent.

I began traveling that pathway of diverse East–West cultural exchange known as the Silk Road, discovering how history evolved through the cultural interaction of the West, Middle East and Far East. Over a period of 30-odd years, I journeyed along this path of cultural exchange on the Eurasian Continent around 150 times, visiting South Korea, North Korea, China, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Nepal, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Turkey, Egypt, Kuwait, Bahrain, Abu Dhabi, Oman, Greece, Yugoslavia, Italy, France, Germany, Britain, the Netherlands, Belgium and Russia.

I visited the birthplaces of human civilization – the Tigris–Euphrates, Nile, Indus and Yellow River valleys – learning how humankind created civilizations. During my journeys through Asia and the Middle East, I was grieved at times to witness armed conflict between ethnic and religious groups. A great many cultural relics have been destroyed, not only through natural decay, but also by war. Theft of valuable relics has also occurred, partly due to poverty, and partly due to a lack of respect for cultural heritage. UNESCO has established systems, such as World Cultural Heritage and World Natural Heritage designation, for preserving humankind's common heritage. These welcome systems work to protect the world's cultural treasures.

The Taliban, however, blew up giant stone statues of Buddha in Bamyán, Afghanistan, and a great many of Afghanistan's cultural treasures have been destroyed or illegally exported. In May 2001, UNESCO held a seminar in Kabul regarding the protection of Afghanistan's cultural treasures and proposals for their preservation and/or reconstruction. Participant countries expressed their support from their respective standpoints. As a UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador, I also expressed my views regarding the preservation of cultural treasures. In particular, I requested that UNESCO register the Buddhas of Bamyán and the surrounding caves as World Heritage properties to prevent illegal digging in the area.

There are valuable archeological remains and cultural properties throughout Asia and the Middle East. Some countries do not have the resources to preserve these treasures or register them with UNESCO. It is my sincere hope that other countries will step in and register these cultural treasures of humankind with UNESCO on behalf of these poorer countries while respecting their sovereign rights.

My experience of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima created within me an ardent prayer for peace through cultural respect. I do not mean that cultural properties should be preserved as mere objects, divorced from issues of humanity. People in war-torn countries have been wounded and impoverished in internal conflicts. To them we must extend humanitarian assistance, both spiritual and material, in the spirit of a 'Cultural Red Cross'.

As a UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador, I supported the preservation of the Dunhuang cave-temple in China and Angkor Wat in Cambodia. At present, I am supporting a campaign to have DPR Korea's Kokuryo ancient tomb mural paintings registered as a UNESCO World Heritage property. I am hoping that diplomatic relations between Japan and DPRK will be gently and peacefully resumed through cultural exchange. I believe that this will lead to peace throughout the East Asia region.

I have also been able to persuade UNESCO headquarters to recognize as 'cultural refugees' the cultural properties stolen and illegally exported from Afghanistan, such as the treasures taken from the Kabul Art Museum and mural paintings taken from the Bamyán Valley. I have taken on the responsibility of safeguarding those cultural properties that have found their way into Japan, taking custody of more than 100 such treasures. I will return them to Afghanistan when the political situation there stabilizes and the Kabul Art Museum is reconstructed.

My journeys along the Road of East–West Cultural Exchange have taught me many things. It was also during these travels that I conceived my ideas for co-operating in the preservation of cultural properties and establishing a 'Cultural Red Cross'. In everything, the Silk Road has been my inspiration. To me, this venerable path linking East and West truly embodies the UNESCO spirit.

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