The Silk Road and Beyond: A Conversation with James Cuno and Yo-Yo Ma

Gregory Nosan, Editor, *Museum Studies: One of the central aspects of Silk Road Chicago—and one that has shaped this publication in an important way—is a particular understanding of what the Silk Road means to us today. Can you tell us about this?*

Yo-Yo Ma, Artistic Director and Founder, the Silk Road Project: When we talk about the Silk Road at the Silk Road Project, we use the term both historically and metaphorically. The term *Silk Road* has been used since the nineteenth century to refer to the historical network of trade routes that connected East Asia with the Mediterranean from about 200 B.C. to A.D. 1500. The Silk Road is also a wonderful metaphor: silk and other precious commodities moved from China to Europe, so the road on which those goods traveled came to be called for the goods themselves. Talking about a Silk Road evokes images of a road that's a precious ribbon, running from China to the Mediterranean, trodden by thousands of humans and camels.

But the term is metaphorical in another sense. We primarily use it to stand not just for the material goods that moved along it but also for the ideas that traveled in both directions. We use *Silk Road* to stand for the interconnectedness of peoples who were separated by vast distances, and indeed by decades and even centuries. I think that this commingling of history and metaphor is what makes the Silk Road such an evocative symbol of cultural exchange and connection.

James Cuno, President and Eloise W. Martin Director, the Art Institute of Chicago: Absolutely. At the Art Institute, though, one of our challenges has been to figure out how to articulate—and even expand—these meanings without becoming confusing. On the one hand, we've tried to convey a sense of the historical Silk Road and its legacy by displaying objects from our collection that were produced along the ancient trade routes and that reveal mingling styles, techniques, and materials from different cultural traditions. We've also introduced audiences to more recent works like *Rapture* (see fig. 1), a powerful video installation by the Iranian-born, Berkeley-educated artist Shirin Neshat, as a way to suggest that the cultures of the Silk Road are of course very much alive—and that artists rooted in them are making work of the greatest importance. Neshat's rhapsodic and deeply moving composition is at once very local—concerned with issues of Iranian society and Muslim religious practice—and international, or even primordial. It's of interest to anyone who feels the striking content of its starkly contrasting images, which show men and women performing ritualistic actions.

On the other hand, however, we've decided to broaden the metaphorical significance of the Silk Road: at the Art Institute, we're using the term not only to suggest the ideas that traveled along the trade routes between East Asia and the Mediterranean but also many more of the ways in which cultures have connected and intersected

Opposite: Yo-Yo Ma and James Cuno explain their vision of the Silk Road Chicago collaboration, November 2005.

FIGURE 1. Shirin Neshat (Iranian, born 1957). *Rapture*, 1999. Two-channel video installation; duration 13 min. Howard and Donna Stone Collection, promised gift to the Art Institute of Chicago.

over time, everywhere. So in our exhibitions and in this issue of *Museum Studies*, we're including objects that were producted by societies all over the world, across a broad stretch of time, right up to today. We're also making a point of acknowledging that cultural interchange involved not only trade and intellectual borrowing but also conquest, exploration, colonialism, and religious missions and pilgrimages, all of which are interconnected, overlapping modes of contact—some harmonious, some not—that made their own imprint on the objects in our collection.

GN: *Silk Road Chicago is the Silk Road Project's most ambitious attempt at collaboration—not just with major cultural institutions but, through them, with an entire metropolitan area. Can you talk about how this citywide celebration has taken shape in Chicago and what you hope it might accomplish?*

JC: I think the vision of Silk Road Chicago—which is one of a whole city exploring its own capacity for collaboration on a grand scale—has inspired us to make the connections we've needed to, both between our respective organizations and with the public. The Art Institute, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and the City of Chicago have each worked with the Silk Road Project, and with each other, in unprecedented ways. The number and quality of the events that have taken place has been simply extraordinary: literally hundreds of concerts, special exhibitions, and performances, many of them by Chicago actors, dancers, musicians, and visual artists. I like to think that the success of these programs, and the relationships that we've developed as we've planned them, will be things that we can return to in the future as we consider what public institutions like ours are capable of at our best and explore what other projects we might take on together. I also hope that Silk Road Chicago will give people experiences that they'll remember—an extended time when the city felt particularly exciting as a center of art and culture.

For me, one high point was the opening day of the Silk Road season at the Art Institute, when the museum was alive with over five thousand visitors who came for lectures, stories, gallery talks, and art demonstrations. There were also many performances, including those by the Silk Road Ensemble, the Chicago Children's Choir, and the classical

Indian dancers of the local Natya Dance Theater (see figs. 2–3). The sense of energy in the building that day was palpable. It captured so well, I believe, how civic institutions like the Art Institute can express the character of the audiences they serve. Chicago is a burgeoning, multicultural city of immigrants—this is true now, just as it was in the late nineteenth century, when the museum and the symphony were founded. My sense is that organizations like ours, and collaborations like Silk Road Chicago, provide new ways for us to explore and combine varied, vibrant forms of artistic expression and in the process get a clearer sense of who we are as a community.

GN: *What about you, Yo-Yo?*

YM: As Jim mentioned, Silk Road Chicago came out of conversations with the Art Institute, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and the City of Chicago. Initially, we were talking with the museum and the symphony about a shared residency over a week or two. In each conversation, the idea of the Silk Road resonated deeply, and each partner was able to imagine quickly what it would mean to them—for the Art Institute, exhibitions drawn from its collections along with complementary programs; for the Chicago Symphony, concerts around this theme throughout the year; and for the city, a summer of activities incorporating over seventy cultural groups. Each organization saw the value of Silk Road as a way to draw people together and for audiences to think about and understand the world around them, hopefully with new eyes.

FIGURE 2. Members of the Silk Road Ensemble play on the Art Institute's Grand Staircase at the opening day celebration of Silk Road Chicago, September 2006. From left to right, Hu Jianbing, *bawu*; Nicholas Cords, viola; Yang Wei, *pipa*; Kojiro Umezaki, *shakuhachi;* Shane Shanahan, percussion; Mark Suter, percussion; and Eric Jacobsen, cello. FIGURE 3. Krithika Rajagopalan of Natya Dance Theater performs for visitors in the galleries.

At the Silk Road Project, we study the global circulation of music and musical ideas. We believe that one of the great artistic challenges of our time is to nourish global connections through new cultural developments, even as we're working to maintain the integrity of art that is rooted in authentic local traditions. We hope to do this in Silk Road Chicago, as we reconnect with the artists and traditions of the past, create new works in the present, and reach out to as many of the city's communities as we can. Silk Road Chicago is a creative collaboration with seemingly limitless potential: each partner wants to identify its own treasures and communicate them broadly, so that all of them can be shared. This requires an openness and generosity on the part of everyone concerned, and we have felt that spirit in this city from our first conversations about Silk Road Chicago.

Figure 4. Vasily Kandinsky (French, born Russia, 1866–1944). *Improvisation No. 30 (Cannons)*, 1913. Oil on canvas; 109.2 x 110.5 (43 ¼ x 43 ¾ in.). Arthur Jerome Eddy Memorial Collection, 1931.511.

GN: *The Silk Road Ensemble's 2001 recording was titled* Silk Road Journeys: When Strangers Meet. *It occurs to me that Silk Road Chicago might be characterized as yet another instance of "strangers meeting"—at least in the sense of musical and visual cultures intersecting. Can both of you talk about what you see as being the differences and similarities of music and visual art's ability to register—or themselves be—the sort of cross-cultural encounter this project is interested in?*

YM: I'm glad you asked about this, and my first response would be to say that art and music are in many ways more similar than we might think. Let's take Kandinsky's *Improvisation No. 30 (Cannons)* (fig. 4), an Art Institute work I'm familiar with. I know that Kandinsky is usually considered a great proponent of abstract art, and that he wrote a book in 1912 called *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, in which he discussed the psychological effects of color by drawing analogies between music and art. As I understand it, he was arguing that nonobjective art has meaning—that a triangle can have as much significance as a human face. Nonobjective art may relate well to music, which is in its own way quite abstract. Very little music is strictly programmatic. And good performers must go far beyond musical technique, as important as that is. They must understand music's emotional and often abstract content, communicate that content, and see and feel the reception of that content in their audiences.

GN: *So you're really talking about music's ability to create a sort of emotional understanding between people who might not know one another at all?*

YM: Right. I think that music is one of the best ways human beings have invented to share emotions. Kandinsky talked about the relationship between the artist's immaterial emotion and the material he uses, resulting in the creation of a work of art. And then, if I understand it correctly, according to Kandinsky another relationship develops—between the material (the artist and his work) and the immaterial (the emotion evoked in the observer or, in the

case of music, the listener). This is exactly what I mean when I talk about content, communication of content, and reception of content. It is exactly what I hope for all the activities of Silk Road Chicago.

Making connections is really what the Silk Road Project and the Silk Road Ensemble are all about. I feel that we human beings have much more that connects us than separates us. Music offers one of the most vital ways to feel this interconnectedness—to loved ones and friends, community and nation. But what about connecting to strangers and to cultures that are far away, either geographically or in time? Might we better understand people who are radically different from us by listening to their music? In doing so, might we come to see and hear them on a more human level? Can music help trust to develop? My answer is a resounding "yes."

GN: *Jim, do you envision works of visual art as operating on viewers in the same way?*

JC: I think the immediate, emotional connection with a work of visual art is extremely important—most often sparked by aesthetic attraction. It's that feeling we have of being drawn to an object because of its intrinsic beauty, or some other quality of line, shape, color, narrative content, or evidence of the artist's hand, that intrigues or moves us. I don't need to know much about the artist or the subject of an object to be intrigued by it. All great art is alluring: it

FIGURE 5. *Woman's Robe*, 1840s/60s. Bukhara (present-day Uzbekistan). Cotton, warp-faced plain weave; warp-dyed (ikat); main lining: plain weave; printed; center opening lining: warp-faced plain weave; bottom edge lining: plain weave; cuff lining: 2:1 twill weave; edging: warp twining; 134 x 167.5 cm (52 1/16 x 54 in.). Gift of Guido Goldman, 2005.606.

attracts our attention and stimulates our imagination. We want to know more about it. In the case of the Kandinsky (fig. 4), for example, what are those landscape forms in the painting? And why is there seemingly a hilltop town in the upper right, a pair of cannons in the lower right, and what seems like perhaps an army to the left? Do the explosive, colored forms suggest human combat or the age-old, mythical reenactment of the triumph of right over wrong? On what register of human emotion is this painting playing? It seems to me that artworks, like music, provide us with a way to connect, on a very emotional level, with people and cultures that may be far distant or long dead.

YM: Yes—I was also very moved when I looked at the woman's robe from Bukhara (fig. 5) that entered the Art Institute recently. What a beautiful, multilayered piece. This robe comes from present-day Uzbekistan, but it was woven 150 years before Uzbekistan became an independent country in 1991. Central Asia was in turmoil in the mid-nineteenth century, as European powers wrestled for control. But the weavers who made this robe were working with centuries-old weaving traditions that transcended the geopolitical struggles of their day. Looking at that piece just reinforced my sense that art and music have the ability to help us tap into something bigger than ourselves.

JC: I think it's both wondrous and natural that human beings, however horrible their situation is—whether it be in nineteenth-century Uzbekistan or in Darfur right now—adorn their daily lives with great beauty. What made someone invest the time, energy, and capital in making a robe that could just as easily have been plain and simple? That's what I find so moving about this piece or any number of adorned utilitarian things: people have always cared about beauty. And as we care about beautiful things, and can be moved by the beauty of this robe, we can begin to understand the past—the past of the people who lived in that place, that culture, at just that time, when their world was at the center of a trade network of dazzlingly strange and beautiful things.

We know that artists have always been influenced by other artists and cultures—nothing of consequence has ever been made in isolation. Artists, indeed all of us, are sensitive to new things and places, and we can't help but be attracted to

FIGURE 6. Left: *Jar with the Four Polite Accomplishments.* China, Ming dynasty (1368–1662), reign of Xuande (1426–36). Porcelain painted in underglaze blue; h. 35.6 cm (14 in.). Bequest of Russell Tyson, 1964.693. Center: *Vase with Cover*, 1675/80. Attributed to Greek A Factory, Delft, the Netherlands. Tin-glazed earthenware; h. 58 cm (23 in.). Anonymous gift in honor of Eloise W. Martin; Eloise W. Martin Fund, 1998.515a–b. Right: *Vase*, c. 1750. Puebla, Mexico. Tin-glazed earthenware; h. 49 cm (19 ¼ in.). Gift of Mrs. Eva H. Lewis in memory of her husband, Herbert Pickering Lewis, 1023.1445.

them. What scholarship helps us do, however, is better appreciate the specific nature of that influence—and of innovation, too. A great example of this is the story of blue-and-white ceramics. By the tenth century, Iraqi potters figured out how to use cobalt compounds to decorate their works with a rich, blue color. This technology then spread to China, which began producing blue-and-white porcelain for export beginning in the 1300s. By the sixteenth century, these wares were being traded around the world. Portuguese ships carried large quantities to Europe, where artisans in different countries began producing their own versions of blue and white. Meanwhile, Spanish galleons sailing from the Philippines transported Chinese porcelain to Mexico, where potters created *their* own unique variation. So, even a few apparently similar blue-and-white jars reveal—once we know a bit more about them—how trade influenced the transmission of taste and technology over centuries and across vast distances (see fig. 6).

FIGURE 7. Jacob Ochtervelt (Dutch, 1634–1682). *The Music Lesson*, 1671. Oil on canvas; 80.2 x 65.5 cm (31 x 25 $^{3}/_{16}$ in.). Mr. and Mrs. Martin A. Ryerson Collection, 1933.1088.

YM: Many of us at the Silk Road Project have been fascinated by the global circulation of blue and white as a quintessential Silk Road story. In fact, in April 2007 several of our ensemble members are premiering a multimedia performance at the Art Institute that's based on blue-and-white themes. In the work, original music accompanies film footage of children encountering blue-and-white ceramics in a museum; visual images of blue and white, including many pieces in the Art Institute; and stories about blue and white, including a Japanese tale about a hapless serving girl who was accused by her master of breaking a precious plate. Her plight was brilliantly captured by the nineteenth-century artist Hokusai in a famous woodblock print.

GN: *Yo-Yo, would you say that the sort of global circulation we're discussing occurs in the history of music, too?*

YM: Yes, but what really comes to mind is the history of musical instruments. I actually know of two paintings in the Art Institute's collection that illustrate this wonderfully: *The Music Lesson* by Jacob Ochtervelt and *Seventeenth-Century Interior* by Charles Gifford Dyer (front cover and figs. 7–8). Both of these works feature a lute—an important instrument in seventeenth-century European musical life. The lute is related to the Chinese *pipa* in a fascinating way: both are ultimately descended from a Central Asian instrument, the *barbat*, which traveled to China along the Silk Road about two thousand years ago. In time, the *barbat*, which had four strings, developed into the four-stringed *pipa* and the Japanese *biwa*. The *barbat* also traveled west, where it was adopted by the cultures of West Asia. Its name changed to *oud*, the Arabic word for wood, which was what the instrument was made out of.

FIGURE 8. Charles Gifford Dyer (American, 1846–1912). *Seventeenth-Century Interior*, 1877. Oil on canvas; 94 x 71.1 cm (37 x 28 in.). Gift of Henry W. King, 1902.227.

After the Muslims conquered North Africa and Spain beginning in the eighth century, the *oud* entered Europe. In fact, the European word *lute* derives from the Arabic *al oud*. So, while the inhabitants of Dyer's richly appointed room admired their blue-and-white jar and oriental carpet, they may not have known that their lute was also indebted to trade, travel, and cross-cultural exchange between Asia and Europe.

GN: *Jim, why do you think the Silk Road has become such a focus of popular fascination and scholarly interest in our own time? What do we see of ourselves in it, and what does it help us understand about how we live?*

JC: We live in an especially interrelated world. Travel and broadcast communication—and of course the Internet—have dissolved the obvious barriers of time and distance. We are all aware of other cultures, and to a remarkable degree. Part of what I think appeals to us about the historical Silk Road, with all of its cultural mixing and borrowing, is that it offers us a different way to understand our own historical moment. Ours is an age of resurgent nationalism. The break-up of empires, from the Ottoman to the British and Soviet, and the success of independence movements after World War II, have propagated the view of people as divided into nations comprising "pure" ethnic or cultural characteristics. However, as the historical Silk Road shows us time and again, nothing in the world's history argues in favor of this. We are defined as a species by our ability, indeed compulsion, to adapt by accepting influences, modifying them, and creating new conditions. Anthropologists call this *hybridity*. Ancient Roman authors, who were less kind, called it *contamination*.

I agree with the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, who argues against the notion of purity and in favor of contamination as a condition of cosmopolitanism, which he holds to be truer to the human condition than the utopian ideal of ethnic and cultural purity. I believe strongly that museums like the Art Institute are instruments for the dissolution of superstition and prejudice. Our very collections work this way. They are manifestations of hybridity and contamination. They give evidence of artistic influence and cultural interrelatedness. And they are what allow us to call ourselves a humanist enterprise—in the sense that Edward Said described humanism when he referred to it in *Orientalism* as "the final resistance we have against the inhuman practices and injustices that disfigure human history."

GN: *Jim, you've talked before about how you believe that Silk Road Chicago offers visitors "alternative ways" to access the Art Institute's collections. What do you think adopting such alternative approaches does for museums like ours, both as an interpretive choice and as a decision that changes the experience of our visitors in important ways?*

JC: Like most museums, we now offer access to our collections primarily by chronology, cultural area, and media. But there are other ways to experience objects: we can encourage the appreciation of alternative connections across time and space, in terms of color, iconography, materials, or ornament, for example, without radically altering our installations. The very themes of this publication—travel, trade, and transformation—are an example of this approach at work.

By focusing on objects in our collection and asking our visitors to look at them differently—particularly in terms of how they show signs of having been made in light of various artistic influences that contradict the simplistic, modern definitions of cultural purity—we'll be true to the objects themselves and the history of their making and subsequent history in the world.

At the Art Institute, this has required us to try and slow people down and encourage them to look afresh at objects in our collection, to be drawn to them, and to ask new questions about them. It has also required us to reconsider what we possess, focusing new attention on those artworks that embody hybridity in different, powerful ways. One of my favorite examples is a fourteenth-century German reliquary that incorporates a rock-crystal perfume bottle made in Fatimid Egypt (fig. 9). While this is one of the museum's treasures, it's also a great example of an object that, as a consequence of trade, underwent a transformation that's at once literal and metaphysical. As Egypt's Muslim rulers sold off their collections of carved rock crystal in the 1060s, personal luxury items like this one found their way to Europe. This bottle was redeployed in quite a different way, becoming a transparent vessel for a saintly relic, an extremely precious object to a medieval Christian.

Another benefit of Silk Road Chicago is that it gives us an important opportunity to remind visitors that the Art Institute is, in fact, an encyclopedic art museum—that we hold in trust for them a significant part of the world's shared artistic legacy, with a permanent collection that is rich and deep across all of our curatorial departments. We're not only a venue for important special exhibitions, but are, first and foremost, a resource that is available, every day, to the public, whether they are residents of Chicago or not. I think that Silk Road Chicago has helped us advance our mission as an encyclopedic museum, and that one of the most exciting aspects of this project has been how it has challenged us, as art historians and educators, to work together to find inventive ways of displaying the objects in our care, helping visitors discover the many stories they tell and the many ways they matter.

FIGURE 9. *Monstrance with Tooth of Saint John the Baptist*, 1375/1400. Brunswick, Germany. Gilt silver; 45.5 x 14.6 cm (17 ⅞ x 5 ¾ in.). *Rock Crystal Bottle*, 900/1000. Egypt, Fatimid dynasty (909–1171). Gift of Mrs. Chauncey McCormick, 1962.91.