

Cosmopolitan Trove On the Road to China

Photographs by Carol Halebian for The New York Times

By **HOLLAND COTTER**

THE eyes of the world are zeroed in on a battered patch of Central Asia right now, scrutinizing its every move. At the same time, global events in recent years have prompted an increasingly wide-angle view of Asia itself, revealing it to be an array of disparate and dynamic cultures rather than a one-color shape on the map.

For New Yorkers, the Asia Society has played a significant role in this expanded perspective. A decade or so ago the society was one of Manhattan's better-kept secrets. Its program of lectures and concerts had a devoted, even cultish following, as did the scholarly exhibitions packed into its two small galleries. Quiet and lightly trafficked, it was the sort of place you might go to when you wanted to be alone in public.

When the art historian Vishakha N. Desai arrived as director in 1990, things began to change. The scholarly exhibitions continued, but often with timely hooks. Ms. Desai's debut offering, which coincided with political attacks on the National Endowment for the Arts, was about art censorship in 18th-century Japan. And under her

The bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara in "Monks and Merchants" at the new Asia Society and Museum; below, Yong Soon Min's work.



aegis, contemporary Asian and Asian-American art was brought fully into the picture in a series of major, globe-leaping exhibitions. A wallflower institution was thinking big.

Now the Asia Society — renamed the Asia Society and Museum — has the physical size to match its ambitions. Tomorrow, its Park Avenue headquarters will reopen after a renovation designed by the architect Bartholomew Voor-sanger. It doubles the exhibition space, introduces a courtyard cafe and a multimedia visitors' center, and connects everything with a floating staircase rising through four levels.

With so many features introduced at once, including commissioned pieces by contemporary artists, it's probably inevitable that the initial results have a somewhat hectic, hodge-podge look. What matters most for visitors, though, is that the new galleries on the second and third floors are a success. Their scale feels right, the light is good, and they are filled with some of the most entrancing art in the city.

"Monks and Merchants: Silk Road Treasures From Northwest China, Fourth Through Seventh Century" is the headline show, and for good reason. Most of its entries are recent excavations on loan from China's cornucopian provincial museums. And the exhibition's theme is

Continued on Page 32

INSIDE

INSIDE ART

Homegrown but large: The curators of the 2002 Whitney Biennial pick out works by 113 artists.

30 DESIGN REVIEW

Luxury and opportunity combine in a show of Candace Wheeler's work at the Metropolitan Museum.

36 BOOKS OF THE TIMES

With "The Feast of the Goat," Mario Vargas Llosa produces a classic Latin American novel.

41

Spirituality and Cosmopolitan Treasures

Continued From Weekend Page 29

an exciting but little-studied one. It concentrates on the area of remote northern China where the Silk Road linked the country to the rest of Asia and the West.

The area was the flashpoint for far-reaching cultural changes in China during the centuries of political disarray between the fall of the Han dynasty in A.D. 220 and the rise of the Tang in A.D. 618. Here nomadic populations entered from the north to mingle with the native population. Merchandise of all kinds flowed in from as far away as the Mediterranean, bringing novel ideas, values and languages with it. Under this steady influx of foreignness, the very definition of "Chinese" was destabilized, as one can gather from the objects on view.

Among the show's earliest entries are three bronze horses recovered from a Han tomb; thrillingly animated, they are in the finest Chinese tradition of reimagined naturalism. But another northern tomb built a few centuries later for a Chinese merchant-official of Central Asian descent yielded a cache of multicultural treasures: Byzantine coins, Persian glass and a spectacular silver-gilt ewer covered with Greek mythological scenes and probably made in present-day Afghanistan.

The truly transformative import, though, wasn't an object; it was an idea, Buddhism. It arrived during the Han but took firm root in the centuries that followed, when waves of monks from India and Central Asia tagged along with merchant caravans. Carrying scriptures, relics and images, buoyed by missionary zeal and the sightseer's hunger for the exotic, they established extensive cave monasteries — Dunhuang is the best known — all along the Chinese section of the Silk Road.

They also created distinctive forms of Buddhist art within China, often for non-native dynasties like the Northern Wei and Sui which came and went during the years of disunity. Examples of such work are brought together in a single chapel-like gallery. The most imposing piece is a granite carving of the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, or Guanyin in China, protector of travelers and a spiritual hero of incomparable smiling grace.

But most of the Buddhist cave sculpture was executed in painted clay, a perishable but malleable and expressive medium. Its plastic qualities are seen to advantage everywhere here: in a large figure of the

Three exhibitions open tomorrow at the Asia Society and Museum, 725 Park Avenue, at 70th Street, (212) 288-6400. "Monks and Merchants: Silk Road Treasures From Northwest China, Fourth Through Seventh Century" is on view through Jan. 6, then travels to the Norton Museum of Art, Palm Beach, Fla. (Feb. 7 to April 21). "The Creative Eye: New Perspectives on the Asia Society's Rockefeller Collection" is on view through April 14, and "Conversations With Traditions: Nilima Sheikh and Shahzia Sikander" through March 3.



Pieces from the Rockefeller Collection in "The Creative Eye," one of three inaugural exhibitions, opening tomorrow. Right, an ancient Chinese pagoda, with contemporary banners

Buddha's disciple Kasyapa, depicted as a beak-nosed foreigner; in the forms of two gleefully swaying little bodhisattvas who look as if they can barely suppress a laugh; and in the tiny figure of a Buddhist angel, flying in a steamlined cloud of drapery over a gallery door.

The exhibition ends with the Tang dynasty, when the internationalist currents of four fragmented centuries were consolidated. Sometimes referred to as the golden age of Chinese Buddhist art, the Tang has received much attention in the West. The mercurial era addressed in "Monks and Merchants" has not, but the curators of this perfect-size exhibition — the art historians Annette L. Juliano and Judith A. Lerner, and Colin Mackenzie, associate director and curator of the Asia Society and Museum — have given its history an indelibly glamorous shape.

History is being made in another way one floor above in "The Creative Eye: New Perspectives on the Asia Society's Rockefeller Collection." The collection, modest in size but overwhelming in quality, was assembled by John D. Rockefeller 3rd and his wife, Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller. It was handed over to the Asia Society in 1978 with the idea of being put on permanent public display. Only now has that plan gone into effect.

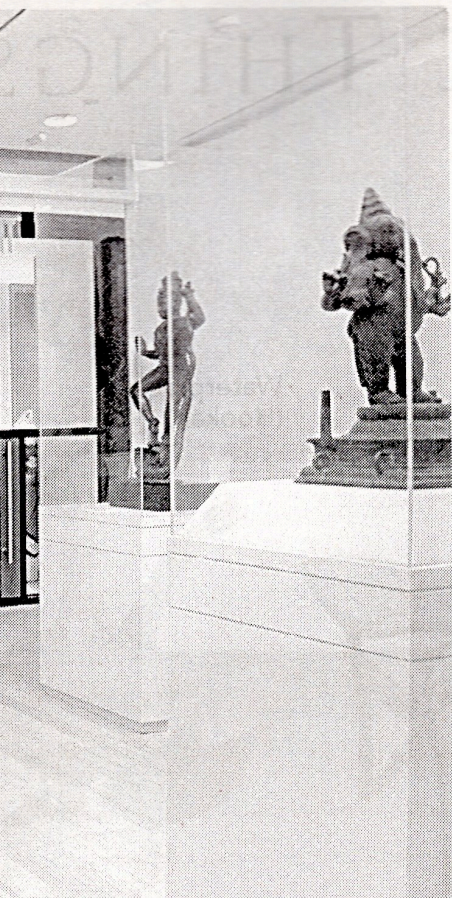
For the inaugural installation, the Asia Society asked a group of artists, performers and writers to select objects from the collection. Several of the artists picked South and Southeast Asian pieces. Bill Viola chose painted manuscript pages from Nepal; Shahzia Sikander, a head of the Buddha from Pakistan. And Joel Shapiro went for the best of the best, the fabulous eighth-century Maitreya, or Buddha-Yet-to-Be, from Thailand, who "sets a standard of behavior," Mr. Shapiro writes in an exhibition label, adding, "I think that is what gods do; that is their job."

To have such images on rotating, year-round view is really to give the Rockefeller Collection to the people of New York City, always the intended recipients, for the first time. Years ago, the sight of this material arranged, willy-nilly, around the walls of an Asia Society storage room provided one of my own mind-shifting close encounters with Asian art. Now, that encounter can be everyone's.

Equally stimulating, though in a very different way, is the show "Conversations With Traditions: Nilima Sheikh and Shahzia Sikander." Here the past comes into the present in the work of South Asian artists of two generations who draw inspiration from classical "miniature" painting.

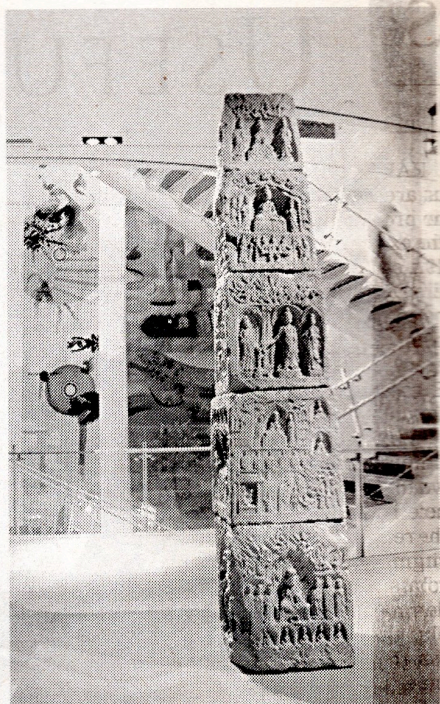
For Ms. Sheikh, born in New Delhi in 1945,

s on the Road to China



Photographs by Carol Halebian for The New York Times

Exhibitions for Asia Society's new museum gal-
lery along the staircase in background.



Suffice it to say that the art of this astonishing artist grows clearer and richer by the year and has never looked stronger than it does here.

"Conversations With Traditions" was organized by Ms. Desai. And it underscores the vital contribution she continues to make to contemporary Asian art, through exhibitions, through commissioning works by young artists for the renovated building and through curatorial appointments. (The Asia Society recently created a staff position of curator of contemporary Asian and Asian-American Art; Melissa Chiu from Australia has the job.)

this is a first full-scale local appearance and a notable one. Her recurrent subjects are scenes of violence against women, but they are depicted in hushed, luminous colors and soft forms reminiscent of amorous Kangra miniatures and the "national" style of Indian art developed in Bengal in the early 20th century.

In the 1984 series "When Campa Grew Up," the story of a young bride murdered by her husband's family is told with a kind of balletic restraint. Recent paintings about the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan, and the physical and psychic violation it caused, move at a solemn, ritualistic pace. Ms. Sheikh's blend of formal sweetness and conceptual bitterness is slow-acting and subtle, but effective.

Ms. Sikander, who was born in Pakistan in 1969 and has lived in the United States since 1991, takes a different approach to the miniature tradition. On the one hand, she has mastered its exacting technical demands; on the other, she has infused it with an international vocabulary of images and ideas.

Her part of the show actually amounts to a mini-retrospective, ranging from the autobiographical "Scroll" from 1991-92 to brand-new paintings bursting with witty, intricately layered riffs on art history, personal history, digital technology and pop culture.

Not all of the eight commissioned pieces were fully in place earlier this week, but those that were looked good. Sarah Sze has a fantastic corner installation of minute platforms, ledges and trees, the sculptural equivalent of a world in a grain of sand, on the third floor. And on the basement level near the auditorium, the California-based Yong Soon Min has a wall-filling assemblage of L.P. recordings of Asian or Asian-American pop music. A clock has been set in the center of each disk, and the dozens of silently moving hands suggest how fast and relentlessly everything moves ahead, even in the "timeless" Asia of myth.

No one has worked harder in recent years to puncture such myths, or at least to hold them up to critical scrutiny, than the Asia Society itself. Nor has anyone taken as much care to flesh out the larger Asian picture with historical detail and intellectual argument, as seen in the current exhibitions of art old and new, borrowed and owned, sublime and troubling. In real time, "Asia" is changing by the minute. It has never been more important to learn about those changes than now. The Asia Society and Museum is a place to begin, and continue, to do so.

ART REVIEW

***ART REVIEW; Cosmopolitan Trove
On the Road to China***

By Holland Cotter

Nov. 16, 2001

THE eyes of the world are zeroed in on a battered patch of Central Asia right now, scrutinizing its every move. At the same time, global events in recent years have prompted an increasingly wide-angle view of Asia itself, revealing it to be an array of disparate and dynamic cultures rather than a one-color shape on the map.

For New Yorkers, the Asia Society has played a significant role in this expanded perspective. A decade or so ago the society was one of Manhattan's better-kept secrets. Its program of lectures and concerts had a devoted, even cultish following, as did the scholarly exhibitions packed into its two small galleries. Quiet and lightly trafficked, it was the sort of place you might go to when you wanted to be alone in public.

When the art historian Vishakha N. Desai arrived as director in 1990, things began to change. The scholarly exhibitions continued, but often with timely hooks. Ms. Desai's debut offering, which coincided with political attacks on the National Endowment for the Arts, was about art censorship in 18th-century Japan. And under her aegis, contemporary Asian and Asian-American art was brought fully into the picture in a series of major, globe-leaping exhibitions. A wallflower institution was thinking big.

Now the Asia Society -- renamed the Asia Society and Museum -- has the physical size to match its ambitions. Tomorrow, its Park Avenue headquarters will reopen after a renovation designed by the architect Bartholomew Voorsanger. It doubles the exhibition space,

introduces a courtyard cafe and a multimedia visitors' center, and connects everything with a floating staircase rising through four levels.

With so many features introduced at once, including commissioned pieces by contemporary artists, it's probably inevitable that the initial results have a somewhat hectic, hodgepodgey look. What matters most for visitors, though, is that the new galleries on the second and third floors are a success. Their scale feels right, the light is good, and they are filled with some of the most entrancing art in the city.

"Monks and Merchants: Silk Road Treasures From Northwest China, Fourth Through Seventh Century" is the headline show, and for good reason. Most of its entries are recent excavations on loan from China's cornucopian provincial museums. And the exhibition's theme is an exciting but little-studied one. It concentrates on the area of remote northern China where the Silk Road linked the country to the rest of Asia and the West.

The area was the flashpoint for far-reaching cultural changes in China during the centuries of political disarray between the fall of the Han dynasty in A.D. 220 and the rise of the Tang in A.D. 618. Here nomadic populations entered from the north to mingle with the native population. Merchandise of all kinds flowed in from as far away as the Mediterranean, bringing novel ideas, values and languages with it. Under this steady influx of foreignness, the very definition of "Chinese" was destabilized, as one can gather from the objects on view.

Among the show's earliest entries are three bronze horses recovered from a Han tomb; thrillingly animated, they are in the finest Chinese tradition of reimagined naturalism. But another northern tomb built a few centuries later for a Chinese merchant-official of Central Asian descent yielded a cache of multicultural treasures: Byzantine coins, Persian glass and a spectacular silver-gilt ewer covered with Greek mythological scenes and probably made in present-day Afghanistan.

The truly transformative import, though, wasn't an object; it was an idea, Buddhism. It arrived during the Han but took firm root in the centuries that followed, when waves of monks from India and Central Asia tagged along with merchant caravans. Carrying scriptures, relics and images, buoyed by missionary zeal and the sightseer's hunger for the exotic, they established extensive cave monasteries -- Dunhuang is the best known -- all along the Chinese section of the Silk Road.

They also created distinctive forms of Buddhist art within China, often for non-native dynasties like the Northern Wei and Sui which came and went during the years of disunity. Examples of such work are brought together in a single chapel-like gallery. The most

imposing piece is a granite carving of the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, or Guanyin in China, protector of travelers and a spiritual hero of incomparable smiling grace.

But most of the Buddhist cave sculpture was executed in painted clay, a perishable but malleable and expressive medium. Its plastic qualities are seen to advantage everywhere here: in a large figure of the Buddha's disciple Kasyapa, depicted as a beak-nosed foreigner; in the forms of two gleefully swaying little bodhisattvas who look as if they can barely suppress a laugh; and in the tiny figure of a Buddhist angel, flying in a streamlined cloud of drapery over a gallery door.

The exhibition ends with the Tang dynasty, when the internationalist currents of four fragmented centuries were consolidated. Sometimes referred to as the golden age of Chinese Buddhist art, the Tang has received much attention in the West. The mercurial era addressed in "Monks and Merchants" has not, but the curators of this perfect-size exhibition -- the art historians Annette L. Juliano and Judith A. Lerner, and Colin Mackenzie, associate director and curator of the Asia Society and Museum -- have given its history an indelibly glamorous shape.

History is being made in another way one floor above in "The Creative Eye: New Perspectives on the Asia Society's Rockefeller Collection." The collection, modest in size but overwhelming in quality, was assembled by John D. Rockefeller 3rd and his wife, Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller. It was handed over to the Asia Society in 1978 with the idea of being put on permanent public display. Only now has that plan gone into effect.

For the inaugural installation, the Asia Society asked a group of artists, performers and writers to select objects from the collection. Several of the artists picked South and Southeast Asian pieces. Bill Viola chose painted manuscript pages from Nepal; Shahzia Sikander, a head of the Buddha from Pakistan. And Joel Shapiro went for the best of the best, the fabulous eighth-century Maitreya, or Buddha-Yet-to-Be, from Thailand, who "sets a standard of behavior," Mr. Shapiro writes in an exhibition label, adding, "I think that is what gods do; that is their job."

To have such images on rotating, year-round view is really to give the Rockefeller Collection to the people of New York City, always the intended recipients, for the first time. Years ago, the sight of this material arranged, willy-nilly, around the walls of an Asia Society storage room provided one of my own mind-shifting close encounters with Asian art. Now, that encounter can be everyone's.

Equally stimulating, though in a very different way, is the show "Conversations With Traditions: Nilima Sheikh and Shahzia Sikander." Here the past comes into the present in the work of South Asian artists of two generations who draw inspiration from classical

"miniature" painting.

For Ms. Sheikh, born in New Delhi in 1945, this is a first full-scale local appearance and a notable one. Her recurrent subjects are scenes of violence against women, but they are depicted in hushed, luminous colors and soft forms reminiscent of amorous Kangra miniatures and the "national" style of Indian art developed in Bengal in the early 20th century.

In the 1984 series "When Campa Grew Up," the story of a young bride murdered by her husband's family is told with a kind of balletic restraint. Recent paintings about the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan, and the physical and psychic violation it caused, move at a solemn, ritualistic pace. Ms. Sheikh's blend of formal sweetness and conceptual bitterness is slow-acting and subtle, but effective.

Ms. Sikander, who was born in Pakistan in 1969 and has lived in the United States since 1991, takes a different approach to the miniature tradition. On the one hand, she has mastered its exacting technical demands; on the other, she has infused it with an international vocabulary of images and ideas.

Her part of the show actually amounts to a mini-retrospective, ranging from the autobiographical "Scroll" from 1991-92 to brand-new paintings bursting with witty, intricately layered riffs on art history, personal history, digital technology and pop culture. Suffice it to say that the art of this astonishing artist grows clearer and richer by the year and has never looked stronger than it does here.

"Conversations With Traditions" was organized by Ms. Desai. And it underscores the vital contribution she continues to make to contemporary Asian art, through exhibitions, through commissioning works by young artists for the renovated building and through curatorial appointments. (The Asia Society recently created a staff position of curator of contemporary Asian and Asian-American Art; Melissa Chiu from Australia has the job.)

Not all of the eight commissioned pieces were fully in place earlier this week, but those that were looked good. Sarah Sze has a fantastic corner installation of minute platforms, ledges and trees, the sculptural equivalent of a world in a grain of sand, on the third floor. And on the basement level near the auditorium, the California-based Yong Soon Min has a wall-filling assemblage of L.P. recordings of Asian or Asian-American pop music. A clock has been set in the center of each disk, and the dozens of silently moving hands suggest how fast and relentlessly everything moves ahead, even in the "timeless" Asia of myth.

No one has worked harder in recent years to puncture such myths, or at least to hold them up to critical scrutiny, than the Asia Society itself. Nor has anyone taken as much care to flesh out the larger Asian picture with historical detail and intellectual argument, as seen in

the current exhibitions of art old and new, borrowed and owned, sublime and troubling. In real time, "Asia" is changing by the minute. It has never been more important to learn about those changes than now. The Asia Society and Museum is a place to begin, and continue, to do so.

Three exhibitions open tomorrow at the Asia Society and Museum, 725 Park Avenue, at 70th Street, (212) 288-6400. "Monks and Merchants: Silk Road Treasures From Northwest China, Fourth Through Seventh Century" is on view through Jan. 6, then travels to the Norton Museum of Art, Palm Beach, Fla. (Feb. 7 to April 21). "The Creative Eye: New Perspectives on the Asia Society's Rockefeller Collection" is on view through April 14, and "Conversations With Traditions: Nilima Sheikh and Shahzia Sikander" through March 3.

A version of this article appears in print on Nov. 16, 2001, Section E, Page 29 of the National edition with the headline: ART REVIEW; Cosmopolitan Trove On the Road to China