

# Artists along the Silk Road

by Henry Glassie and Pravina Shukla

The Silk Road, historically a tangle of trade routes across Asia, raises for us the idea of connections between East and West, providing an evocative prelude to the globalization of the present. The Silk Road chastens us to remember that transnational connections are not unique to our age. And then, we are chastened further to recall that the connections of the past were not merely commercial. The most splendid yield of the connections made along the Silk Road was art, and evidence of old motion and past exchange is still to be found in the living arts of Asia.



## West

At the western edge of Asia, on the Aegean coast of Turkey, a great mountain lifts, rolls, and slides into the sea. Mount Ida to the ancients, Goose Mountain to the Turks, it holds in its folds a scatter of compact villages built upon the sites of their winter encampments by nomadic Turks. The land is rocky, unfit to the plow. Sheep pick among the rocks and grow the wool that is sheared and combed, spun, dyed, and woven into beautiful carpets, red with the rosy glow of dawn.

Fatma Balcı sits at the loom, between her mother and aunt, in their stone home in the village of Ahmetler. They use no plan, no cartoon, but weave *kafadan*, from the head, sitting together and improvising like jazz musicians, weaving their separation into symmetrical unity. Rolling the carpet on the wooden beam below, they cannot see what they have done as they tie knots to the warp, color by color, trapping rows of dyed dots between shoots of weft. After weeks of work and hundreds of thousands of knots, they cut their creation from the loom. Praise God: from their heads, through their fingers, perfectly formed geometric motifs rise on a placid red field, framed by busy borders. This carpet, into which they have poured themselves in concentration, in dedication, is *sanat*, art — a palpable sign of their skill, taste, and commitment.

It incarnates them and symbolizes their place, being one of the dozen designs found on the floor of their village mosque.

Ahmet Balcı, Fatma's father, says that his people — he calls them the Turks — followed their flocks out of Central Asia, settled, and continued to weave the carpets that are emblems of their Yörük, nomadic, identity. The scholar, looking closely at the motifs on their carpets, can retrace the trail of their migration eastward, finding comparable motifs in the weavings of northwestern Turkey, south-central Turkey, northern Iran, and Central Asia.

Fatma Balcı will keep the best of the carpets for her dowry. Others she will donate to her mosque in commemoration of deceased loved ones. Most will go to market in the town of Ayvacık, and then to Istanbul, before finding their places of rest on the floors of fine homes in Washington or London, Stockholm or Melbourne. In this there is nothing new. Paintings by the masters of the Renaissance, showing rugs draped over altars and spread beneath the feet of princes, prove that carpets woven in Fatma's region of Turkey have been purchased and prized in the West for 600 years.

Connecting Central Asia with Turkey through migration,

*Women sell carpets woven in nearby villages at the market in Ayvacık, Çanakkale, Turkey.* Photos by Henry Glassie/Pravina Shukla

Turkey with the world through commerce, the Oriental carpet has achieved universal appreciation. Asserting order in its geometry, subverting order in its spontaneous handcraft, intensely human, the Oriental carpet — a woman’s art, a folk art, a fine art — has become one marker of the presence of our species on the earth. It is rivaled in its global spread and acceptance only by Chinese porcelain.

Istanbul is the key node in the network of trade through which Turkish carpets have traveled the world. Soon after Mehmet II, Fatih, took Istanbul and made it the capital of the Ottoman Empire in 1453, a strong hall was built for fine textiles, and the streets around it were vaulted to create the Covered Bazaar. There the land routes from the East ended, and elegant commodities were sent by sea to Europe. Spices and cotton from India, silk and porcelain from China came by stages through the caravanserais of Anatolia to make Istanbul — the natural capital of the world, said Napoleon — the center of global trade. The Ottoman sultans wore caftans of silk, and they so appreciated Chinese porcelain that a vast collection remains at the Topkapı Palace in Istanbul. In the ambit of imperial favor, Turkish artisans were inspired to experimentation, working through the last decades of the 15th century to invent a variety of pottery called *çini* (cognate with “china”), which, though low-fired and technically unlike porcelain, emulates its ring and sheen.

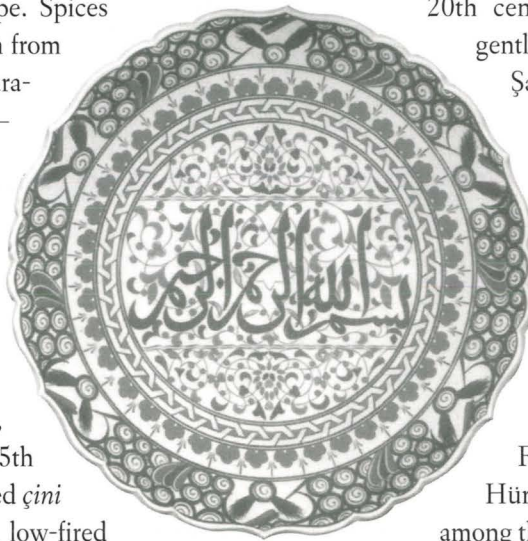
At two centers in western Turkey, in the cities of Iznik and Kütahya, Turkish potters at first imitated the blue-and-white porcelain of Jingdezhen. Then in a surging series of innovations, they made it their own in the 16th century, adding new colors, notably a luscious tomato red, and pushing the designs toward natural form and Islamic reference. Iznik failed early in the 18th

century, but the tradition has faltered and flourished through a sequence of revivals in Kütahya, where today, in ateliers numbering in the hundreds, *çini* is made.

The master of the atelier, a man like Ihsan Erdeyer at Süsler Çini, directs a team of workers. Men mix seven elements to make a composite white substance — they call it mud — that is shaped, slipped, and fired. Women pounce and draw the designs, filling them with vibrant color before the ware is glazed and fired again. They make tiles to revet the walls of new mosques. They make plates, domestic in scale and association, that do at home what tiles do in the mosque, bringing shine and color and religious significance to the walls.

The master and his team depend upon a designer. In the 20th century, Kütahya’s greatest designer was a gentle, confident, marvelous artist named Ahmet Şahin. As a young man, he was one of two potters who brought the tradition from the brink of extinction at the end of World War I. As an old man, he drew the majority of the designs used in the dusty ateliers, he painted magnificent works to inspire his city, to keep quality high, and he taught all who came to him. Ahmet Şahin died in 1996 at the age of 90, but his robust style continues. Two of his sons, Zafer and Faruk, are masters. Zafer’s son, Ahmet Hürriyet Şahin, and his wife, Nurten, number among the foremost artists of contemporary Kütahya.

As many as 40,000 people are involved in the *çini* trade, but a small number of artists who design and paint the ware lead the city. Their styles are diverse. Sıtkı Olçar seeks the new, İsmail Yigit copies the old, and Kütahya’s tradition advances in the hands of those who have shaped personal versions of the works of the old masters. Nurten Şahin, famed for new calligraphic designs, paints with clarity and supernatural precision. İbrahim Erdeyer, son of Ihsan, paints in a bold manner, reminiscent of Ahmet Şahin. Mehmet Gürsoy, teacher and entrepreneur, paints with delicate finesse, accepting and then breaking the rules, and he has set the new standard, becoming the leader most artists choose subtly to follow.



*This plate is painted with the Besmele (Bismila), the opening formula of the Koran (Qur'an): In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. It was designed and painted by Nurten Şahin, Kütahya, Turkey. Collection of the Indiana University Art Museum*



Their art, and they insist it is art, not mere craft, depends on material quality, on a smooth white surface and gem-like colors set beneath a lustrous glaze. It depends on meticulous painting, on faultless lines drawn and filled with paint in an altered state of concentration, when, with passion, the artists transfer themselves into their work, making *çini* an embodiment of their devotion. And their art depends on Islamic significance, gifts to the mind and soul: calligraphic designs that repeat beautifully the very word of God; geometric designs that represent the will of the one God bringing order to the universe; floral designs that symbolize a harmonious society, governed by love.

### East

As Kütahya is to Turkey, Arita is to Japan. It is a small city of potters on the southern island of Kyushu, where a Korean potter

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*Mustafa Oruç works at the wheel at Nakiş Çini, one of hundreds of potteries in Kütahya, Turkey.*

discovered porcelain clay at the beginning of the 17th century. As in Turkey, the first pieces of Japanese porcelain were inspired by Chinese examples, but, as in Turkey (though a century later), Japanese artisans soon adjusted porcelain to their place, adding colors to the blue-and-white palette and creating new designs, some to meet a Japanese taste, and others that, sent out on Dutch ships, achieved commercial success in Europe. The ware intended for the West came to be known as Imari, after the city through which it was traded. Among Arita's traditions favored in Japan, one — Kakiemon, named for the family that has continued its practice to the 14th generation — is remarkable in its parallels with Kütahya. Kakiemon porcelain features the color red and exhibits bright floral patterns on a snow-white field. And, as the potters of Kütahya strove in the 20th century — first in the days of Ahmet Şahin, then in the days of Mehmet Gürsoy — to accom-

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*(Opposite page) One of Noria Agawa's lion sculptures comes into being in this sequence: from an early phase, to the middle phase, ready for glazing, and finally glazed and boxed for shipping.*



plish anew the technical excellence of the 16th century, so did the potters of Arita struggle in the 20th century to match the technical excellence of the 17th century.

Sadao Tatebayashi, a designer and painter in the Kakiemon atelier, was a member of the team that restored old excellence to the porcelain of Arita. Upon his retirement, he established his own workshop, Korin-An, where his son, Hirohisa, is the master today.

Hirohisa Tatebayashi says that porcelain is so complex that no one can make it alone. It takes ten years to master each facet of production, and he has assembled a team, including his son, Naonori, who work to the highest standard. Their inspiration is Sadao Tatebayashi, who died in 1992. They use his designs, as Ahmet Hürriyet and Nurten Şahin use those of Ahmet Şahin, but they have also widened their reach beyond the Kakiemon tradition, painting blue-and-white plates based on Chinese originals, and, to close the circle perfectly, they have begun painting plates with Turkish designs — the very designs favored in modern Kütahya — lifted from recent publications.

“Delicate” is the word Hirohisa Tatebayashi consistently uses to describe his painting. Delicacy of brushwork suits the smooth, luminous surface, the immaculate white ground, and the fine forms of porcelain. The contrast is complete with the roughly touched surfaces, dripping glazes, and earthy distorted forms of the stoneware made for the tea ceremony, practiced by millions in modern Japan. Tea ware provides an opportunity for another story of cultural connection.

When the aristocratic tea ceremony was at the peak of its fashion, early in the 17th century, the lord of the Mori clan brought two Korean potters to Hagi in western Japan to make ceremonial vessels. Evolved from Korean precedent in the lineage of the Miwa and Saka families, Hagi *yaki* is made now in 200 ateliers in the city and its environs. In his sunny shop on the banks of the Hashimoto River, Norio Agawa works alone, making tea bowls, thrown to

retain the track of his fingers and flowing over with a thick white glaze that drifts on the gritty surface like snow on a gravelly beach.

Reflecting the paradoxes of a Zen view of the world — smooth and rough, bright and dull — Norio Agawa’s bowls and vases for the tea ceremony exemplify Hagi’s tradition, but the heart of his practice lies in sculpture. Late in the 17th century, a brilliant potter of the Saka family added sculpture to Hagi’s repertory, and Norio Agawa has studied his works and continued his line. Norio Agawa’s pride is the lion. He calls it a Chinese lion. Lions come in pairs, one female, one male. In China, they sit, the male with a ball, the female with her cub. In Hagi, they pounce, the female with her mouth open to speak the sound of the beginning, the male with his mouth closed to murmur the sound of the end. Together they utter the sound of eternity — “om” — and vigilantly guard the Buddha’s way.

Miraculously raising clay by hand around nothing into expressive hollow forms, Norio Agawa also shapes human images. One is the brooding Daruma, a monk who came from India to China in the 6th century to establish both the Zen inflection in Buddhism and the discipline of the martial arts. But, like his brother Hachiro Higaki, who learned from him, Norio Agawa images most often the Seven Gods, ubiquitous in Japan as the recipients of popular devotion, the donors of good fortune.

The Seven Gods are also the prime subjects of the ceramic sculptors of Seto, an ancient city of potters in central Japan. Their handling of the clay expresses the range of their personalities. Susumu Kato slowly shapes images that are refined and precise. Denko Maekawa hastily makes impressionistic figures that display the pinch and pull of the clay yielding to the artist’s hand. Shigeyuki Masuda works between them, enjoying, like Susumu Kato, the counterpoint of glazed and unglazed surfaces, while creating figures that embody his own calm and gentle personality.

Assembled into a set since the 15th century, the Seven Gods



bespeak old connections. The one figured most often is Hotei, a Chinese Zen priest of the 10th century, merry and fat, big with compassion for the people of the world. Next is the pair Daikoku and Ebisu, a carpenter and a fisherman, smiling bringers of wealth, native to Japan. Then there are the bearded Chinese deities of wisdom and longevity, Jurojin and Fukurokuju. At last there are Bishamon in armor and Benten, the only woman among them, the Japanese incarnation of Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of learning and art – both ultimately from India. From Japan, the Seven Gods carry us westward to Daoist and Buddhist China, and southwestward to Hindu India.

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*Haripada Pal, of Dhaka, Bangladesh, sculpted and painted this clay image of Kali (standing), which is worshiped in the Shankharibazar Kali Mandir.*

## South

From the world's tallest mountains, great rivers run to the sea. Where the sacred Ganges, the Brahmaputra, and the mighty Meghna meet and merge, their silt has built the world's widest delta, the territory of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. The land is lush and green, relentlessly flat, free of stones, and rich in clay for the potter.

There are 680 villages of potters in Bangladesh. Most of the potters are Hindus, bearing the same surname, Pal, designating them as members of the craft-caste of the workers in clay. They make vessels to carry water and cook food, and the most talented men among them also sculpt *murtis*, images of the deities for worship. The greatest of them all is Haripada Pal, who works in a cramped, damp shop on Shankharibazar in the capital city of Dhaka. Trained by his grandfather in the village of Norpara, Haripada traveled west and east to India, perfecting his craft.

Haripada Pal frames an armature of sticks, wraps it with rice straw, and covers the straw with clay. In the clay, he says, there is the seed of all creation, a drop of God that springs to life with prayer. In his body, too, there is a drop of God, the soul that enables all action. As he works, massaging the clay into symmetrical form, the God in his body erupts through his fingertips to reunite with the God in the clay, and his sculpture is infused with power. Then he sands the surface and paints it for beauty.

On the day of worship, the deity is invited into the clay. Delighted with the beautiful image, the God descends and stays as long as the lights dance, the incense smokes, and the songs of praise continue. The devotees press forward, taking *darshan*, connecting eye to eye with the potter's creation, asking for the boons that make life on this earth tolerable. Then the night passes, the songs end, the God leaves. The statue is empty, a pretty shell. It is borne to the river in a jubilant, carnivalesque procession and immersed, sacrificed, melted back into the water that carries the silt from which the *murtis* of the future will be shaped. The rivers go on running.

Haripada Pal's technique differs from that of the Japanese

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*Opposite page: Weaving shops line the road through the village of Kazipara, Rupganj, Bangladesh, at one of the eastern ends of the Silk Road trade routes. Here, weaving traditions are being passed on in the workshop of Askar Ali.*

potters. Their images are hollow, his are filled with sticks and straw. Theirs are fired, his are dried without firing because heat and flame would destroy the power that abides in dampness. Yet, Haripada's technique was once employed in Japan, where it was carried, out of India, through China, with Buddhism. And like the potters of Japan, Haripada serves the needs of his community, though, for him, the highest goal is to make art so excellent, so pleasing to God that, upon his death, Haripada will be released from the endless cycles of reincarnation into a state of eternal bliss.

Haripada Pal says he is a poor man, but happy because he spends his days shaping the body of God. In clay, he depicts the full Hindu pantheon, but he specializes in the prime deities of Bengal: Radha and Krishna, the very vision of love, and Durga, the great goddess, with her children: Saraswati, the goddess of wisdom; Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth; Kartik, the dapper god of war; and Ganesh, the Lord of Beginnings, with his opulent paunch and elephant's head. Hindu artist in the predominantly Muslim nation of Bangladesh, Haripada Pal connects, in his work, westward to India, to Calcutta and Banaras, where sculptors in clay work as he does.

Upriver from Dhaka, the Ganges bends to embrace Banaras, the city of light and smoke, the holiest city of Hinduism, the best place to die. As it was when the Buddha delivered his first sermon just outside the city, Banaras is a place of industry and commerce as well as perpetual prayer in its temples more numerous than the rice grains in a ten-kilo sack.

Sculptors work in stone, carving images of the Hindu deities. Jewelers hammer gold and set precious stones, repeating luxurious ornaments from Mughal times. But the most renowned of the city's artistic creations is the silk sari that Indian women hope to wear for their weddings. In three neighborhoods — mazes of alleys clicking and humming with the report of the loom — Muslim men weave the long strips of brocaded silk that Hindu brides drape as saris, that Muslim brides cut and sew into *sakwar kameez*, matching pants and tunics.

What Hirohisa Tatebayashi said of porcelain, Hashim Ansari said of the Banarasi sari. Its production is too complex for one person to master. Silk weaving requires teamwork. Hashim Ansari divides the tasks with his three brothers in one of the four

workshops run by cousins on the first floor of the tall building where all of them live. Hashim's father, Abdul Qaiyoum, decides upon the designs. Drawn on paper, the design is taken to Manuj Kumar, the *cardwallah*, who punches holes rapidly, translating the design, line by line, onto perforated cards. Linked in sequence, the cards are fed into a Jacquard apparatus that dangles from the ceiling above the loom in the dark workshop. A French invention of the early 19th century, used extensively in North America to weave coverlets, the Jacquard device changes the pattern when the weaver tramps on a pedal that brings a new card





into position above him. Metal fingers poke through the holes in the card, causing some warp threads to lift. The weaver — Hashim Ansari in one shop, his cousin Sadique Ansari in another — runs an extra weft through the pattern and follows it with quick shots of the shuttle. The loom is a pit loom of the old Indian sort, married to a European machine to create shimmering silk strips, intricately brocaded in shades of gold.

All the brothers in Hashim Ansari's shop are weavers, but Mohsin is the color king, the master of dyeing, Shameem repairs the finicky machines, and Hashim takes their creations to market. The streets of the city are lined with stores selling the very finest saris. Most of the saris are the city's product in silk, but they are displayed along with saris brocaded on cotton so sheer that the designs seem to float on air.

To find the source of these fine cotton saris, we return down the Ganges to the delta of Bengal, where, in the countryside east of Dhaka, brocaded — *jamdani* — saris are woven by Muslim men and women on thousands of looms. Weaving shops line the road through the village of Kazipara, Rupganj. Bamboo sheds shelter pit looms like those of Banaras, but there is no machine to set the pattern. Instead, masters like Showkat Ali and Enamul Haque sit to the right, with a helper to the left, and pierce the weft by hand and eye, running an extra weft into the warp and then securing it with two passes of the shuttle. The designs, heavy or light, are angular and geometric, less intricate than those of

*Azizul Haqim weaves a jamdani sari in the workshop of Enamul Haque in Kazipara, Rupganj, Bangladesh.*

Banaras, but *jamdani* saris are prized for their handcraft and for the diaphanous web that surrounds the woman who wears them with a gauzy haze of light. The *jamdani* sari of Bangladesh, like the Banarasi sari of India, is expensive. The women of Rupganj weave *jamdanis*, Showkat Ali said, but they do not wear them.

At Rupganj, on the wide green delta of Bengal, we are at one of the eastern ends of the trade routes that carried goods and inspiration westward. Fine cotton cloth, woven in remote villages, sold in the markets at Demra, then Dhaka, went by caravan through Mosul in Iraq, gaining the name muslin, and Bengali muslins have been treasured by European consumers for more than 2,000 years.

The routes across Asia, convenient for warriors and mystics as well as merchants, for the movement of ideas as well as commodities, carried spice and cotton from India, silk and porcelain from China, and carpets from Central Asia, Iran, and Turkey to the great cities of the Ottoman Empire. At Bursa, the first Ottoman capital, the Silk Road ended at the Kozahan, a stone building near the Great Mosque, where today silk is woven and farmers bring silk cocoons for sale in a market that puts the American observer in mind of the tobacco auctions of North Carolina. At Istanbul, the Covered Bazaar spreads between the Forum of Constantine and the mosque of Beyazit, offering a bounty of Asian goods, of textiles and ceramics, that provoke the historical imagination.

Carried overland to be shipped from Turkish cities, or traveling the long route by sea from China and Japan, Asian works of art found such appreciation, and inspired so many imitations, that they have been absorbed into the culture of the West, so thoroughly absorbed that we do not stop to notice our debt to the East, when, say, in a small hotel in rural Ireland, we walk across linoleum embossed with a design from a Turkish carpet, and sit down for a breakfast of oatmeal served in a willowware bowl that is an English version of an original from China.

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*Expensive brocaded cotton jamdani saris are sold at market in Demra, Bangladesh. Fine cotton cloth woven in remote villages, sold in the markets at Demra, then Dhaka, went by caravan through Iraq and have been treasured by European consumers for more than 2,000 years.*

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