Cosmopolitan Trove
On the Road to China

By HOLLAND COTTER

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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.

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INSIDE ART

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

DESIGN REVIEW

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

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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 from the north mingled 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, hungry 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 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.

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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.

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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.

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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