

Routes of trade and more: about the diffusion of western art and Indian tales

Monika Zin

Saxon Academy of Sciences and Humanities
Monika Zin: zin@saw-leipzig.de

(Received: 2023/07/11, Published online: 2023/07/11)

The designation of 33 cities on the “only” 5.000 km long section of the Silk Roads, the Tian-shan corridor, as World Heritage Sites was explained by UNESCO by referring to their outstanding universal value, “linking multiple civilizations and facilitating far-reaching exchanges of activities in trade, religious beliefs, scientific knowledge, technological innovation, cultural practices and the arts”. My paper will focus on the latter two points, but underline that the diffusion of cultural practices and the arts cannot be limited to the time when the Silk Roads existed, and that “cultural practices” also includes the diffusion of literature.

The exchange between civilizations seems to have happened from East to West and vice versa. Transmission from West to East, however, is far easier to observe, because hundreds of surviving art objects show a clear adoption of a Mediterranean aesthetic to the northwest of the Indian subcontinent and from there via the Silk Roads to East Asia.



Fig. 1. Corinthian capital with Buddhist worship group, from Gandhara, Pakistan, 1st-3rd century CE. © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst / Iris Papadopoulos CC BY-NC-SA

The spread in the other direction is less obvious; However, when comparative studies began – in which the University of Leipzig and Johannes Hertel, Indologist and member of the Saxon Academy, and his research on *Pancatantra* played a significant role – India was not without reason called the “mother of all fairy tales”, since it was Indian tales that spread to the West via the Silk Roads and can be traced in Jean de la Fontaine’s fairy tales, among many others.



Fig. 2. ‘The sly cat’. Bharhut, 2nd century BCE. Kolkata, Indian Museum. © Gudrum Melzer



Fig. 3. ‘The sly fox’ Jean de la Fontaine (1621-1695), illus. Auguste Delierre (1829-c.1890)

Of particular interest is also the story of the Christian saint Josaphat, who recognized the transience of the world after seeing an old man, a sick man and a dead man; the figure of Josaphat and his story are closely related to that of the Bodhisatva, i. e. the Buddha in his youth. Both the *Pancatantra* and the tale of *Barlaam and Josaphat* became ‘bestsellers’ of mediaeval Europe. In both books, the parable of the ‘Man in the Well’ portrays the perpetuation of a human being seeking sensual pleasure in the face of omnipresent perils. This narrative also originated in India but its adaptations gained prominence in cultures that did not believe in reincarnation.



Fig. 4. ‘Man in the Well’. Nagarjunakonda (Andhra Pradesh, South-East India), 3rd century CE, Nagarjunakonda Site Museum, no. 24. © Wojtek Oczkowski CC BY-NC-SA



Fig. 5. ‘Man in the Well’. Woodcut by Günther Zainer from the *Barlaam and Josaphat*, Augsburg, ca. 1476; after Schramm, Albert: *Der Bilderschmuck der Frühdrucke*, vol. 2, Leipzig 1923, no. 559