

## **REVIVING THE CLAVIJO ROUTE: NEW OPPORTUNITIES OF CONNECTING WITH THE EUROPEAN MARKET**

I am very grateful of this invitation that has been extended to me on behalf of the Niemeyer International Cultural Center of Spain to join this Caravan on the Silk Road by the World Tourism Organization and the Government of Uzbekistan. I would like to present to you a project in which history and adventure take us in such a quest through time and distant lands in the search of answers relevant to all of us in the present moment. This journey between Madrid and Samarkand, that we intend to launch next year, will follow on the footsteps of Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo, along this ancient road.

The growing interest in the Silk Road as a thoroughfare of culture, trade, ideas and political relations is proof of the relevance of this region for the development of an international civilization now as well as throughout history. Central Asia disappeared from the centre stage of world politics, until in the XIX century the "Great Game" re-enacted the struggle for world power in the forgotten cities of the Silk Road. Nowadays, this region is again one of the focal points of world news, either for the military campaigns in Afghanistan and its regional implications or because of the new geopolitics of oil and gas, the control of energy resources in the Caspian and the supply routes to India and China. Growing commercial relations in the region present us with a good opportunity of discovering other dimensions besides the economic one. The questions of mobility is associated now with tourism as much as trade, but too often void of its dimension of a personal quest, as an experience of inner transformation that would also have an impact in the communities involved.

The king of Castille, Henry III, sent in 1403 an Embassy to Timur Beg, sovereign of Transoxania and the most powerful ruler of Asia. This diplomatic initiative showed the insight of the Spanish monarch concerning the connection between the political and

strategic situation in the Mediterranean and Central Asia, a vision well ahead of its time. At the same time, the narrative of the journey of Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo and his companions has remained one of the most fascinating examples of travel books in history. The Ambassadors sailed from Puerto de Santa Maria to Constantinople and then to Trabzon, on the Black Sea Coast, travelling on horseback through Iran, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan until they reached Samarkand.

Timur was a political and military genius, but history has not been kind to this contradictory figure, remembered more as a ruthless conqueror than a patron of arts and builder of cities. His own memoirs show a very different personality, a visionary politician ahead of the ideas of his time. His beloved city of Samarkand is the most beautiful tribute to the memory of this ruler passionate about arts and architecture. 600 years ago, the World was in a period of great convulsions that toppled empires and kingdoms, destroyed prosperous cities and created the conditions for the modern age. Mongols and turkmen tribesmen were the agents of this cataclysmic changes, that we are using as the point of departure for our research. At the same time, Timur and his successors were enthusiastic patrons of the arts, leaving us a rich artistic tradition that lived through the Safavid and moghol empires.

Re-enacting the journey of Clavijo and the Spanish Embassy to Timur would be the best way to commemorate this event and raise awareness on its historical and cultural context, as well as its relevance for our time. At the same time it would be a real cultural embassy. The aim of this project is not just the re-enactment of a historical journey, besides its symbolic value, but to bring forth alternatives for sustainable human development. The issues of international cooperation and cultural tourism are part of an emerging alternative paradigm to the unlimited growth of economic models we still act upon. This situation opens extraordinary possibilities for us, reactivating with increased power art and culture as a new creative force. At the same time, there is a great deal of confusion and insecurity for the lack of

references and paradigmas , that trigger our atavistic fears , ethnic hatred and religious fanaticism. Integrating those contradictions in a new synthesis that channels positively those tremendous energies, will determine our future. For that reason, culture in its different manifestations, including cultural diplomacy, has become extremely important.

Daryush Shayegan, in his work "Light comes from the West", refers to the three phenomena that define our chaotic contemporary world: the loss of the magical dimension of existence, the destruction of reason and the hegemonic discourses and the replacement of imagination by a virtual dimension linked to the expansion of audiovisual technologies. These phenomena are characterized by the destruction of all ontologies and the interconnectivity of all the spheres of reality, and the generalization of multiple identities . In other words, diversity and the simultaneity and coexistence of different world visions and forms of life are the key of our epoch.

At the same time, there is a great deal of confusion and insecurity for the lack of references and paradigms that trigger our atavistic fears, ethnic hatred and religious fanaticism. Integrating those contradictions in a new synthesis that channels positively those tremendous energies, liberated in the process just described, will determine our future. For that reason, culture in its different manifestations, including cultural tourism, has become extremely important. Conferences such as this one, highlight the growing importance of tourism to build more constructive human and international relations, integrating those multiple identities in an open and tolerant framework.

Contemporary art is one of the more useful tools to research into this vast and dangerous realm of our collective unconscious and the archetypes we often prefer to ignore. The core of the curatorial project would be to present the research and production of artists from Turkey, the Middle East, Iran and Central Asia from

a contemporary perspective. Workshops along the same route, Barcelona, Istanbul and Samarkand, with artists trailing the same Silk Road will reveal new and exciting dimensions for the international art world. ArtDubai, the Istanbul biennale and other artistic venues could echo this experience. Simultaneously, we intend to curate another exhibition on textile art as the nomadic expression of artistic experience and its relation to contemporary art. Its boldness of design and extraordinary colours, so close to the abstract painters of the XX Century, represent the world in a magical way, rendering the unseen and emotions in patterns always new and original. We would like to research more deeply on the connections with this collective unconscious in which Rothko, Mondrian or Malevich can express their feelings in a similar way as the anonymous weavers on these ancient lands.

At the same time there is a cultural program that will bring to the Niemeyer Center music, dance and other cultural expressions from the countries that Clavijo visited. The cultural component is key as the return journey, like a caravan loaded with riches collected along the way. Bringing back such cultural treasures will make it possible to share that experience and encourage more people to travel and discover for themselves the fascinating countries that Clavijo visited and vividly described six centuries ago. In that true human experience, the boundaries of our identity dissolve and the interconnection among all human beings and the natural world manifest itself. The question of personal experience has been brought over and over again in this forum. The tourists or independent travelers of our time do not want a merely visual show through the window of a bus, they want to taste real life in the countries they visit and share unique cultural experiences.

This journey is precisely about that, making it possible for others to follow on those tracks and show that it is possible to recreate great adventures of the past, walk, ride or cycle through these countries safely and have direct contact with its nature and its people.

Finally, we need to address some issues that not only us will face when undertaking this project, but any other transnational traveller along the Silk Road if he chooses to avoid planes and flying over borders. The visa procedures and the border controls, specially in the cases of traveling on horseback for veterinary procedures, can be discouraging and problematic. It is possible to create a network of professionally specialized adventure travel agencies , but they will need a facilitating framework that allow such journeys to take place.

Ramón Blecua  
Spanish Diplomat  
Consultant for the Niemeyer International Cultural Center  
HYPERLINK "mailto:Ramon.blecua@gmail.com"  
[ramon.blecua@gmail.com](mailto:ramon.blecua@gmail.com)