

REMAINS IN LIGHT HIRO YAMAGATA'S ART FOR A NEW AFGHANISTAN

BY JESSE ASHLOCK

top The cliffs of Bamiyan, Afghanistan, where two ancient Buddha statues once stood bottom Artist Hiro Yamagata's plans for a laser-show tribute to the lost monuments



THROUGHOUT THE CENTURIES, ARTISANS have sculpted likenesses of the Buddha in wood, clay, porcelain, precious metals, gemstones, and living rock. Now, Hiro Yamagata aims to add light to that list.

In 2003, the government of Afghanistan solicited a proposal from the 57-year-old Japanese-born, Los Angeles-based laser artist for a permanent installation set into the scarred sandstone cliffs of Bamiyan, northwest of Kabul: a reimagining of two Greco-Buddhist statues that had stood there from the 5th century A.D. until five years ago, when the Taliban decided they were an idolatrous affront to Islam and destroyed them despite a worldwide resistance effort led by UNESCO. In one day, Afghanistan lost its most beloved historic monument—one that had survived numerous wars and an invasion by Ghengis Khan before its sudden demise. Once the Taliban's regime was dismantled, UNESCO wasted no time in attempting to cauterize the country's wound.

Yamagata's ambitious project was chosen for its value as a modern design solution that commemorates the long and fractious religious history of a place at a great cultural crossroads, the center of the Silk Road, while acknowledging the realities of the Muslims who live there today.

His concept isn't to use lasers to remake the Buddhas precisely as they stood, like the Swiss government first proposed to do in sandstone. Instead, Yamagata plans to project 240 images of the figures—each standing 175 feet, the height of the taller of the two originals—from indigenous mud huts positioned along the Bamiyan Valley floor. His Buddhas will be squiggly abstractions, scanned from rice paper drawings and rendered in constantly shifting neon colors. As Yamagata observes, light is seen as a manifestation of the spiritual across cultures and denominations: "It's an elemental phenomenon," he says. "Light is always holy."

Just as artisans constructed the original Buddhas using the most advanced Hellenic engineering of their day, this new monument will be built with the latest in laser physics; such technological considerations stand to benefit the impoverished, war-torn community of Bamiyan financially as well as socially. The installation will be powered by a mile-long strip of solar panels and wind mills hidden on the far side of the cliff, which will generate extra electricity for 20,000 dwellings in the valley below. Trees and potato farms will be planted there; new mud brick houses and a tourist market will be built (before they were destroyed, the Bamiyan buddhas were Afghanistan's top source of tourist revenue). Yamagata also intends to establish a laser physics program at Bamiyan's university, graduates of which could be hired to perform maintenance on his system. In addition, the artist is acutely aware of the project's symbolic importance to a country in the throes of rebuilding and reimagining itself. "I'm very attached to Afghanistan's children," he says. "I'd like to show them this new technology and the new world."

Last December, after Yamagata formally presented his plan along with a detailed environmental impact statement, the Bamiyan Laser Project received UNESCO's blessing. This year, he plans to roll out an international fundraising blitzkrieg to finance the \$64 million project, and in 2007 he'll employ local labor to install the laser systems, solar panels, wind mills, and power plant for an anticipated June 2009 launch. After that, Yamagata hopes the installation—"instead of representing a particular religion," he insists—will become a trademark of a more harmonious Afghanistan, one in which personal faith is held in high regard and sectarian violence is left behind. *

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Rock of Ages

Bamiyan's Buddhas are long gone, but will live on through cutting-edge technology; the same principle is now being used to preserve one of the world's largest repositories of Buddhist artifacts at a site 2,000 miles east along the Silk Road, in the Chinese city of Dunhuang.

There, 4th-century Chinese Buddhists carved a mile-long series of grottoes into the town's cliffs, creating more than 490 temples and 484,200 square feet of religious wall murals. Since 1993, conservators have been working not only to protect Dunhuang's paintings, manuscripts, textiles, and coins, but also to increase awareness of the treasures and ensure public access to them by creating a free digital photo-catalog of 100,000 relics from the site. The process of digitizing can reunite fragmented materials and restore damaged ones, such as ancient manuscripts patched over with mismatched pages or greasy from seven centuries of handling. The

International Dunhuang Project went online in 1998, and Susan Whitfield, IDP's director at the British Library, estimates that 80 percent of its archiving work will be complete by the end of the decade.

In addition, for the past six years, the Mellon Foundation has financed a project to photograph and digitally stitch together the local Mogao Grottoes' murals and Buddha statues, enabling scholars to peruse details unavailable without personally "putting in scaffolding and lights," Whitfield explains. The team's next step is to use archaeology applications for 3-D modeling of the caves.

However comprehensive the reconstructions, they're no substitute for viewing such a magnificent spread of artifacts in their authentic location, of course. "We find that digitization, even though it increases access, doesn't reduce demand to see the originals," Whitfield says. "It increases demand."—J.A.



The Getty Foundation sponsors an independent restoration project focused on just one of the Mogao caves in Dunhuang, China. [above](#) photographing the mural