Great Mosque of Djenné

Mali. Founded c. 1200C.E.; re-built 1906-1907. Adobe (2 images)

- Article at Khan Academy
- As one of the wonders of Africa, and one of the most unique religious buildings in the world, the Great Mosque of Djenné, in present-day Mali, is also the greatest achievement of Sudano-Sahelian architecture
- the largest mud-built structure in the world
- became one of the most important buildings in town primarily because it became a political symbol for local residents and for colonial powers like the French who took control of Mali in 1892
- epicenter of the religious and cultural life of Mali
  - also the site of a unique annual festival called the Crepissage de la Grand Mosquée (Plastering of the Great Mosque).
- Original mosque started - then subsequent rulers added towers, then big wall to surround it, and then still others added more until (it is said) 1/2 the entire city of Djenne could fit inside
- adobe and mud buildings such as the Great Mosque require periodic and often annual re-plastering. If re-plastering does not occur, the exteriors of the structures melt in the rainy season
- rebuilt in the 1830’s and then again 1906-1907 – each time a little different
  - New scholarship supports the idea that the mason’s guild of Djenné built the current mosque with the help of forced laborers from villages of adjacent regions, brought in by French colonial authorities.
  - To accompany and motivate workers, musicians were provided who played drums and flutes.
  - Workers included masons who mixed tons of mud, sand, rice-husks, and water and formed the bricks that shape the current structure
- At the top of the pillars are conical extensions with ostrich eggs placed at the very top—symbol of fertility and purity in the Malian region
- Timber beams throughout the exterior are both decorative and structural. These elements also function as scaffolding for the re-plastering of the mosque during the annual festival of the Crepissage
- the present Great Mosque includes several innovations such as a special court reserved for women and a principal entrance with earthen pillars, that signal the graves of two local religious leaders
- During the annual festival of the Crepissage de la Grand Mosquée
  - mud plaster made from a mixture of butter and fine clay from the alluvial soil of the nearby ruvers
  - The men of the community usually take up the task of mixing the construction material
  - women provide water for the mixture
  - musicians entertain
  - Elders also contribute through their presence on site, by sitting on terrace walls and giving advice
  - young boys sing, run, and dash everywhere
- Djenné’s inhabitants have withstood repeated attempts to change the character of their exceptional mosque and the nature of the annual festival.
  - For instance, some have tried to suppress the playing of music during the Crepissage,
  - and foreign Muslim investors have also offered to rebuild the mosque in concrete and tile its current sand floor
Djenné’s community has unrelentingly striven to maintain its cultural heritage and the unique character of the Great Mosque. In 1988, the tenacious effort led to the designation of the site and the entire town of Djenné as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.