The Silk Road: Travel, Trade and Treasure

LAND and CULTURE (Case 1)

Inner Asia is a timeless, sparsely inhabited land that is occupied by the world’s highest and unforgiving mountain systems and some of the most arid and extensive deserts. Even in these challenging climes of scorching summers and frigid winters, characterized by minimal or non-existent rainfall and even less fertile land for agriculture, archaeological evidence has established that man has inhabited Central Asia continuously since the Paleolithic period.

These nomadic peoples of mixed ethnicity were confined to a marginal existence during pre-modern times as they moved across the vast desolation of Central Asia coping with the changing borders and expansionist politics of adjacent countries and dynasties. It was the abundance of grazing horses, cattle, and sheep that overran Eurasia’s deep valleys, and especially the domestication of the horse, that allowed the nomads to spread outward from Central Asia in successive waves over a period of many centuries. Mass migrations and yearly moves in search of pasture lands brought these nomadic groups in contact with others as they navigated across the steppe area conducting trade and tribal raids. While little is known of these nomads who were intermediaries of this early trade, there were many peripheral groups that intermingled and succeeded in impressing their patriarchal culture and warrior values onto other groups encountered along the way.

The territories encompassing Central Asia have complicated histories as a result of domination at different times by Chinese, Islamic, Mongolian, Tibetan, Turkic, and Sogdian confederations that held sway over regions and furnished a succession of rulers with shifting allegiances. Expanding empires and foreign influences left permanent marks on the evolving cultures of Central Asia which had previously been shaped by purely local conditions.

Art NA5992.38.Z35 1996


Art N7291.B73

Art NA5991.G6 1988

1/2/1  Weng, Wei-ch‘üan. *Xinjiang, the Silk Road: Islam’s Overland Route to China*. Hong Kong; New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.
Art DS793.S62.W43 1986
TRAVEL (Case 2)

The Silk Road has been a romantic subject especially since the nineteenth century when it was aptly coined by the German scholar Ferdinand von Richthofen for one of China’s chief mercantile commodities. This term came to epitomize a sense of exoticism and adventure that still holds today. It was not really a road at all; it was a vast network of land-based trade routes, generally going east and west with links leading into southern Iran, the northern Eurasian steppe, and south over the Hindu Kush to the Indian subcontinent. The stories of merchants, artisans, pilgrims, scholars, soldiers, and other travelers fascinated those who read accounts of their travels and discoveries.

Starting as early as the second century BCE, if not earlier, the routes linked civilizations of China, Central Asia, West Asia, and, to a lesser extent, Europe, and continued for nearly two millennia. Goods and people tended to pass through many affiliations and commercial centers as they proceeded along the greatest and richest trading route in history. In spite of the high risks and formidable obstacles posed by climate, terrain, politics, extortion, and disasters, merchants were undeterred in their pursuit of long-distance exchange because the rewards were phenomenal.

None of the merchants would have planned to travel the entire route (over 4,000 rugged miles), but would have operated between a few local commercial centers. Caravan leaders had to be experts on every aspect of trade and terrain, as well as skillful in managing travelers, peddlers, and livestock. Not
only were camels well adapted for navigating the harsh, shifting sand dunes of the desert, but they could carry more weight than horses or donkeys. Their progress was much slower than mules, but these resilient pack animals needed less water and less pasture to survive the arduous trek.

The caravanserai stop at the end of a day’s journey provided exotic food, unfamiliar music, festive laughter, fascinating myths and stories, and soulful prayer. These en route oasis towns also provided essential services such as hostels, rested animals, and provisions for the local merchants who purchased or sold or bartered goods with other traders. Some oasis centers grew to be prosperous, cosmopolitan cities where distant philosophies and artistic styles synthesized, and merchants and peddlers became very wealthy from profits of long-distance trade.

DS354.6.K57M5313 1978

DS329.4.S532 2004

DS793.S62.W43 1986


DS785 .S83 1964

DS793.S62.S7

Art N7291.L46 1989

Art DS49.7.R87

Art DS793.S62.T82 2003

DS328.2.F76 2005
TRADE (Case 3)

This exhibition offers the opportunity to consider the significance of trade, the spread of religions, the diffusion of ideas, and especially the cultural impact that comingled along the Silk Road. Two factors have always dominated the history of international trade: the pursuit of profits and the allure of the exotic.

Centuries before there was an official avenue to the West, silk was prized for its sheen, brilliant colors, and beautiful patterns. Reluctant to relinquish its reserve of metal money, China used the prestige of silk to pay taxes and wages, and for personal gifts and tributes. Trade in silk became a tool to enhance the political power of the imperial government and became indispensable in bartering for the stronger and swifter breed of horses and weaponry they needed for self-defense. Explorations and missions went west into Persia and beyond, and promoted cultural exchanges that included the building of settlements and missionaries to profit from the passage of travelers along the road.

Individual merchants, innkeepers, investors, camel grooms, and travelers benefited with the creation of markets and the presence of every kind of foreign product. Caravans that conveyed luxury products such as silk, jade, bronze, glass, tea, porcelain, gems, metalwork, spices, and many other items fetched high prices because of their beauty and rarity. Musicians played along the ancient Silk Road on native and unusual instruments. Animal skins and furs associated with notions of status were traded as protective clothing. Ambassadors acquired precious ivory and emeralds as gifts for foreign dignitaries. Markets and bazaars provided an array of foreign delicacies and, over time, ethnic cuisines influenced one another. Fruits and vegetables grew in oases providing food for local consumption as well as for visitors and travelers. Surpluses became another commodity that was shipped on the next caravan heading north, south, east, or west.

At different times and throughout its history, trading centers grew and prospered or waned and fell into ruin along the trails of the Silk Road. Great cities like the Abbasid capital of Baghdad, the Sogdian town of Samarkand, and the Bactrian metropolis of Merv became dynamic commercial centers where goods were traded and affiliated industries such as jewelry and metalwork workshops became established. The caravan cities of the Silk Road benefited both from the trading of these goods and from the taxes and customs duties levied upon merchants.

While one can easily overestimate the economic value of the Silk Road trade, its cultural significance cannot be overemphasized. Also passing through the networks of these thriving, multi-lingual oases were beliefs and ideas that blended to create an intellectual climate that, each in its own specific way, left an impression on the arts.
TREASURES (Case 4)

If anything exemplifies the story of the Silk Road it is that it became the area where civilizations mingled, contributing customs, beliefs, and rituals that in some cases created an individual style, but principally generated the capacity for adaptation and assimilation.

The first religion to reach China via Central Asia was Buddhism. Founded by Siddhartha Gautama (ca. 563?-483? BCE) in northeast India, it enjoyed aristocratic patronage and widespread support. The expansion of Buddhism brought increased demand for silk because of its liberal use in Buddhist
ceremonies. Like other religions, Buddhism made use of art and architecture to illustrate and explain concepts and stimulate religious pilgrimage along the Silk Road. The popularity of Buddhism today comes from a legacy owed in large part to the Silk Road monks and devotees who often carried small shrines and built immense stupas thereby introducing Buddhist culture and doctrine to the Central Asian peoples of the oasis towns.

Manuscripts and wall paintings discovered at ancient sites show that other religions (Zoroastrianism, Islam, Nestorian Christianity, and Manichaeism) traveled along the same road across Central Asia into China along with gold and silver. The religion-trade relationship was mutually reinforcing as travelers and missionaries latched onto caravans journeying to pilgrimage sites, mercantile centers, and schools of learning to find fellowship. Works of art discovered in towns and monasteries abandoned for more than a thousand years are not only indicative of the history and the complex nature of religious movements in Central Asia, but also provide invaluable documentation about the appreciation of the richness and diversity of the cultural environment in which these relationships occurred.

Archaeologists have recovered material evidence from deserted tombs, monasteries, and cave temples containing miles of figural murals painted on chamber walls, and an abundance of reliefs and sculptures, as well as paintings on cloth preserved by the dry climate and cold winters that provide astonishing and unprecedented information of a culture that had disappeared. Probably the most impressive innovation of artistic synthesis occurs in the Greco-Bactrian Empire (modern Afghanistan and Pakistan). Founded by Alexander the Great’s successors, early sculptural portraits of Buddha shows the adoption of Greek drapery and other stylistic features, although the iconography is almost completely Buddhist.

We pause here momentarily reminded of the fragility of our cultural heritage and mourn the willful destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhist sentinels in 2001 as well as other artistic losses.

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Art N 5335.K3.R6

Art ND 991.B813


Art N7280.E87

4/1/5 Bussagli, Mario. *Painting of Central Asia.* Geneva; Skira; [distributed in U.S. by World Publishing Co., 1963].  
Art ND 991.B813
SILK AND OTHER FABRICS (Case 5)

China used silk to enrich its treasury and enhance its diplomatic advantage through gifts of fabric and garments to domains beyond its borders. It is likely that the Romans became acquainted with the precious material around the first century BCE after they subdued the Parthians who unfurled their dazzling silk banners during battle. By 46 BCE Chinese silks had reached Rome, and the Romans were in the grip of a veritable silk fever. (You are invited to Levels 4, 5, and 6 to view the more comprehensive satellite exhibition on topic of silk.)

Silk may have been the most desired material, but certainly other natural fiber textiles, coveted for their durability and versatility, were also traded along the Silk Road. The Chinese especially appreciated Persian and Syrian brocades and cloth from Byzantium. The dry heat of regions of Central Asia and India provided the ideal climate for the production of cotton fabrics with which they were familiar from about 700 CE.
Essential wool from shorn sheep, camels, and yaks became a tradition in the encampments of the Central Asian nomads. Knowledge of how to turn piles of fleece into felt tent coverings and furnishings such as floor mats, blankets, hats, and capes developed very early in the history of nomad civilization.

The spinning of hair, fleece, and vegetable fibers provided yarn for products made by knotting, crochet, and weaving. Motifs were woven, appliquéd, or embroidered onto hangings and trappings in decorative forms to act as identifiers of specific nomadic tribes. The intricately woven rugs and bags that were so intrinsic to the nomadic way of life, were a measure of the wealth and prosperity of the tribe.

Art NK8906.S36 2007

Art N7291.A765 1996

Art N3750.N36.H3713

Art N7283.L44 2002

Art NK8906.S461993

Art N7343.23.C55 2004

Art NK8875.H37 1996

Art N7297.U915 1997

Art N7343.23.C55 2004

Art NK8906.S461993

Art TS1546.T46x 1988

Art NK8801.B7.B7

DS 269 .L87.M67 1993
FABRIC OF LUXURY

Silk—the very name conjures up visions of opulence and luxury, of elegance and refinement, of glamour and sensuality, and even of decadence. Although it was certainly not the only commodity traded along the Silk Roads, ravenous desire for it spurred on the establishment and development of these long-distance trade routes across Asia from the period of Hellenism to that of Mongol domination to the extent that its name has been given to the entire enterprise.

Silk may be cultivated or wild, and raw or refined. Cultivated silk is derived by unwinding the two-ply filament comprising the cocoon of the purposely bred bombyx mori, the mulberry silkworm. This reeled-off filament is processed and can be readily dyed and used as yarn to weave textiles, as thread to sew the finished cloth, and as floss to embroider same. Cultivated silk has always been admired and prized for its lustrous sheen. If the gum sericin adhering the two strands of the filament together is not processed out, the result is ecru, raw silk, with less luster. Tradition attributes the first use of silk fiber by humans to Si-Ling, empress of China, around 2640 B.C.E. However, the earliest known extant Chinese worked silk dates to about 3630 B.C.E. from Honan province, although there is some circumstantial evidence that silk working started during the early fifth millennium B.C.E. From then on silk production advanced to a high level of accomplishment in China, as exemplified by the trove of varied Han dynasty silks found in the tomb of Lady Dai at Mawangdui near Changsha dating to the second century B.C.E. The Chinese kept the methods of silk’s procurement and manufacture secret so as to maintain a monopoly on the lucrative trade in this coveted item.

Over time silk fabrics and skeins of silk yarn found their way around the map to markets where they were highly valued. Wild silk from different species of moths was introduced in India. In this variety, the moth is allowed to develop and break through the cocoon, resulting in short broken lengths of the filament instead of one continuous strand, sometimes up to 1500 meters long. The short bits have to be spun together to produce a thread long enough to be workable. In the West, wild silk was first produced on the Aegean island of Cos, where it appeared by at least the fourth century B.C.E. when it was mentioned by Aristotle in his History of Animals. Silk was being used in the Achaemenid Persian Empire by at least the fifth century B.C.E. Fragments of some very rare, ornate textiles from about the first century C.E. have been excavated at Noin-Ula in Mongolia, and some fragments of silk from the Roman imperial period have been found at the oasis cities of Palmyra and Dura-Europos along the caravan routes through the Syrian desert. Costly silk was very fashionable and in great demand in ancient Rome where huge sums of money were spent on it. This extravagance was decried by Roman moralists. Silk was always a prestige material and a sign of status, along with cloth of gold, cloth of silver, and pinna wool, or byssus, made from the beards of molluscs. Herod Agrippa, client king of Judea in the mid-first century C.E., had a mantle of cloth of silver. Silk can be woven to any degree of opacity or transparency. The clinging tendency and sheerness of thin tissues, revealing the form beneath, were criticized when they were used for clothing. Pliny the Elder in his Natural History quipped that women attired in silk garments were clothed and yet naked.
To the east, the Sassanid Persian Empire during the late antique period excelled in weaving samites, patterned weft-faced compound twills, on drawlooms. A favorite motif was a roundel framed by a decorated border encircling a bird, power animals in heraldic poses, or a fantastic mythical beast, often the fabulous senmurv. This motif, occurring on Sassanian rock reliefs, stucco architectural decoration, silver plate, and silks spread from Persia to textiles woven in the Byzantine Empire, Central Asia, especially Sogdiana/Transoxiana in today’s Uzbekistan, China, and beyond. Byzantine and occasionally Chinese medallion silks introduced human figures and activities into the repertory of subjects depicted. Some of these survive, having been used for ecclesiastical vestments, altar cloths, frontals, shrouds, and reliquary wrappings and linings in Europe, some as Buddhist paraphernalia stored in caves and burials in Central Asia, and some having been sent along with other rare and precious objects as diplomatic gifts to the Mikado of Japan where they became temple dedications that were kept for centuries in the imperial treasury of the Shōsō-in at Nara. High-ranking personages wearing robes fashioned from such stuffs can be seen depicted in manuscripts and murals ranging from the Balkans to Armenia to Turkestan. A caftan of green Sassanian medallion-patterned silk and a second one bordered with strips of a similar fabric along with coordinated leggings found in the Caucasus, and a young prince’s coat tailored from such a scarlet Sogdian silk and lined with a yellow Chinese T’ang dynasty damask from Tibet are rare surviving garments dating to the eighth century. The Mongol elite favored nasij, lampas-weave cloth of gold with a silk foundation and designs only outlined and detailed in silk so as to maximize the metallic surface. A thirteenth-century Mongol robe of nasij lined with samite was found at Mingshuicun, Damao Banner, Baotou, Inner Mongolia.

In the West, the secrets of Chinese silk production finally arrived, according to the story, during the reign of Justinian, emperor of Byzantium, around 550 when two travelling monks smuggled silkworm eggs in a hollow cane from the Orient to Constantinople, although a Chinese source claims that sericulture was practiced in Syria by 429. Local sericulture ignited the Byzantine silk industry which, along with contemporary Islamic workshops as far west as Spain starting in the eighth century, subsequently produced some of the most amazing silks ever created. Some Islamic textiles include a tiraz, an inscription band often mentioning particulars of the manufacture of the piece. Very fine silks with figural and vegetal motifs in purple and ecru woven in Syria or Egypt from the seventh to the ninth century have been excavated at Akhmin along the Nile. By the ninth century the manufacture of silk was established in Sicily, by the twelfth in northern Italy, and by the fourteenth it was flourishing there. Especially notable among the embroidered silk raiment preserved from the medieval period are the Vatican sakkos, a tabard-like liturgical vestment, the Sternenmantel (star-cloak) of the Holy Roman emperor Henry II and the cloak of his empress Kunigunde from circa 1020, and the splendid red and gold ceremonial robe of state emblazoned with politically symbolic imagery of Roger II, king of Sicily, dated 1133-34, a masterpiece of Fatimid art. Lavish furnishing silks survive from Al-Andalus, including banners, cushion covers, and curtains which likely once hung in the Alhambra at Granada.

In 1453 Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks who avidly patronized the silk industry, fostering it in the capital and at Bursa. Ottoman weaving would become renowned for intricate brocades, often shot with gold or silver filé, and for sumptuous velvets, textiles fit for a sultan. By the late 1400s the age of European exploration began in earnest. Routes to East Asia totally by sea were found, and the pre-eminence of the overland Silk Roads to the riches of the East, including its luxurious fabrics, came to an end.

N.B.: This exhibition on silk is split between floors 4, 5, and 6; Examples of Chinese silks are exhibited on floor 3.
FABRIC OF LUXURY

Checklist of the Exhibition

Art N7103 .A4 1992

Art N7832 .B3

Art N520 .A76

Art NK8806 .A17 2010

[Art] N7262 .B6

Art N6250 .G55 1997

Art N7280 .G61

[Art] N6260 .G77

Art N7283 .L44 2002

[Art] N2941 .M313


