

## Crossroads: Exploring the Silk Road Gallery

### Glossary

**Abacus** - A calculating tool that's been used since ancient times. It's origins are disputed. The earliest record of the *suanpan*, or Chinese abacus, is from the 2nd century CE.

**Abrasion** - The process for making detailed objects out of jade which relies on grinding, sanding, and polishing the stone using liquids.

**Amphora** - A vessel form popular in ancient Greece and Rome with two handles and a neck narrower than the body. Amphora were often used as storage jars.

**Buddhism** - A religion based on the teachings of a historical figure, Siddhartha Gautama, who lived around the fifth century BCE. It was the main religion to move across Asia via the Silk Road, absorbing indigenous beliefs and incorporating a wide range of imagery, both local and foreign, into its art and religious practices. Buddhism continues to evolve as a religion in many parts of the world.

**Caravan** - Long lines of pack animals, such as camels and horses, that carried everything from trade goods to tents, personal belongings, and food.

**Caravanserais** - Large stone guest houses similar to modern day hotels which served two main functions: to provide travelers with a safe place to rest and to house a marketplace where merchants could sell and trade their goods.

**Ceramics** - Objects made of clay

**Ewer** - A vase-shaped water pitcher or jug, usually with a flared base, stout handle, and decorative spout. Ewers have been made for thousands of years, originally in metal. This style spread from Rome through Persia to central Asia. In China the form is usually made from clay.

**Flying Apsaras** - or *Feitian*, are often considered a symbol of the Mogao Caves. In Hindu and Buddhist culture, these "celestial nymphs" are a type of spirit of the clouds and waters. They are youthful and elegant, and usually depicted dancing and playing music.

**Jade** - An ornamental stone that has been revered throughout Chinese history, and has been valued for its toughness, coolness (temperature), and ability to become smooth and translucent when abraded. The term "jade" refers to either of two minerals: nephrite or jadeite. Both are extremely hard and impossible to carve like other stones. However, this toughness is what makes jade ideally suited for making fine, intricate objects through the process of abrasion.

**Mogao Caves** - A group of 492 cave temples located in the desert, close to Dunhuang, which were carved into a cliff by Buddhist monks beginning in 366 CE. Over time the caves became increasingly elaborate, filled with colorful murals and sculptures depicting Buddhist narratives and images, supplemented with details of daily life. The caves contain the largest collection of Buddhist art in the world and serve as an important record of cultures along the Silk Road.

**Porcelain** - A type of ceramic first produced in China around 600 CE. What makes it unique is kaolin clay, found in abundance in south-eastern China where it was originally discovered and used. When fired at a very high temperature (up to 2,252 F/1,400 C), kaolin transforms into a very fine, hard, semi-translucent white ceramic. It became one of the most admired and imitated Chinese inventions marveled by the western world.

**Sancai** - A three color lead glaze (amber, brown, and green) used in China that inspired craftsmen in Iran and the Byzantine Empire.

**Sericulture** - The process for raising silk moths and harvesting silk thread.

**Silk** - A luxurious fabric prized for its smooth, shiny texture and ability to keep a person warm or cool. Made in China for thousands of years, the methods and materials for producing silk were kept secret from outsiders as long as possible. Initially, only the Emperor and the people of his court were allowed to wear silk. But once the secret got out, other countries began producing and wearing this valuable material.

**Silk Road** - A network of ancient trade routes, over land and sea, that connected China to Europe and the Middle East. In addition to trade, the routes were a conduit for the transmission of knowledge, ideas, cultures, languages, and beliefs, and had a profound impact on the history of Asia and Europe.

**Suanpan** - A Chinese abacus, or counting tool

**Sutra** - Sanskrit word for "thread." In Buddhism, written texts became known as "sutras" because they bind together once oral teachings into a written form that connects one generation to the next.

**Woodblock printing** - A technique for printing text, images, or patterns used widely throughout East Asia dating back to antiquity using carved wood blocks, similar to stamps. The earliest instance of a woodblock-produced text, a manuscript of the Diamond Sutra dated to 868 CE, was found in the Library Cave of Mogao in Dunhuang. It is considered the oldest existing mass-printed manuscript.