

Crossroads: Exploring the Silk Road Gallery

Complete Gallery Text

A1.

Introduction Text

The Silk Road was 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. Connections made on those ancient routes impact our lives today.

This gallery focuses on a particular crossroads in the Silk Road network: the Chinese city of Dunhuang and the nearby Mogao Caves. For travelers heading west, Dunhuang was the last stop for caravans to rest and stock up on supplies before they crossed the treacherous Taklamakan Desert. For those traveling east, it was the first oasis on Chinese soil and a gateway to the rest of China.

Imagine being a traveler on the Silk Road 1,300 years ago, at the height of the Tang Dynasty, and stopping in Dunhuang after a long journey. What did you wear? What did you eat? What language did you speak?

We invite you to explore our immersive gallery and discover what it was like to encounter new cultures, objects, and ideas.

B1.

Saddle up Your Camel!

Without camels, the Silk Road trade may not have been possible. Bactrian camels, or those with two humps on their backs, are perfectly suited for tough desert conditions, which is why merchants used them in their journeys across the desert.

B2.

Test your camel knowledge!

Give the cylinders a spin.

(Left to Right, top to bottom)

How much weight can a camel carry?

Camels can travel more than 2 miles an hour while carrying up to 300 pounds on their backs. That's as much as 20 heavy bowling balls!

What's up with their long eyelashes?

Their bushy eyebrows, long eyelashes, and closing nostrils help prevent sand from getting in during windstorms.

What do camels eat and drink?

They eat desert plants and don't need a lot of water, sometimes going up to 15 days without taking a drink! Their humps store fat which they use for reserve energy.

How do they stay warm in winter and cool in summer?

Their shaggy winter coat helps keep them warm when temperatures drop below freezing. Later, people use camel hair to make rugs, blankets, and coats.

C1.

Who Traveled Along the Silk Road?

Murals and drawings from the Mogao Caves give us a glimpse into the diversity of those who traveled the Silk Roads. Merchants were integral to the trade network as they moved goods from one place to another, but many others also underwent long journeys. They included explorers, ambassadors, musicians, artists, and patrons. Monks and religious pilgrims also used the network of routes to spread their faiths to new lands.

Travelers trekked across the desert, facing the threat of robbers and harsh weather conditions along the way. People made their journey on foot with the help of pack animals, specifically horses and camels. Merchants traveled in groups called **caravans**. These were long lines of pack animals that carried everything from goods to tents, personal belongings, and food. Local caravan leaders served as guides and translators. They knew where to rest and how to stay on track during sandstorms.

A less celebrated side of the Silk Road included slave trade and the spread of disease on a pandemic scale. These events and actions did not happen in any one specific region, but rather in many places over the span of the routes' existence.

Did You Know?

It was rare for one person to complete the entire trip from start to finish. The entire Silk Road measures roughly 4,000 miles (6,500 km)!

C2.

Sogdian Rider on Horse

China, Tang Dynasty (618-906 CE)

Low fired lead glaze on earthenware

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert M. Snukal

1996.44.9

Along the Silk Road, horses transported people and carried trade goods. The most valuable horses in China came from Central Asia. They were sent from Sogdians to the Chinese emperor as tributes. During the Tang Dynasty, those horses became a symbol of wealth because of their rareness: there were strict laws that limited their use, even by the military.

C3.

Spinning cube

Who were the Sogdians?

The Sogdians were a group of people whose homeland, in present-day Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, was located at the center of several trade routes.

They developed an influential merchant society that profited from trade and shaped a range of art, culture, and ideas across the Asian continent. Sogdian groups immigrated to China and established flourishing communities in China and Central Asia.

C4.

Mogao Caves

The **Mogao Caves** are located in the desert close to Dunhuang, and 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.

Flip through the book below to find out more about the Mogao Caves

C5.

Flip Book

[Page 1](#)

The Mogao Caves

There are about 492 extant cave temples ranging in date from the fifth to the thirteenth centuries. This pilgrimage site is also known as the Caves of a Thousand Buddhas, possibly referring to the legend that a monk had a vision of a thousand Buddhas at the site.

Did you know?

Cave temples are found throughout the Buddhist world. The Mogao Caves at Dunhuang is the largest of these sites in China.

[Page 2](#)

A Thousand Years of Art

The earliest examples of caves were undecorated, small, and used for shelter and meditation. By the early fifth century larger caves were excavated as temples. Many had niches and

freestanding altars, all cut from the stone cliff. Colorful paintings of religious scenes as well as daily life covered everything, even the ceilings.

Page 3

Changes in Artistic Influences

Over time, the style of the wall paintings and sculptures adapted to changing Buddhist beliefs and cultural influences made possible by the Silk Road.

Page 4

Changes in Painting Styles

Early caves show greater Indian and Western influence, while during the Tang Dynasty, Chinese artistic styles of the imperial court dominate.

Page 5

Cave Decoration and Patrons

The decoration of each cave was most often commissioned by a patron. The patron could be an individual and the cave decoration was dedicated to their families and deceased relatives. Some paintings were commissioned by groups of lay individuals or by a religious society.

The major caves were sponsored by patrons such as important clergy, local ruling elite, foreign dignitaries, as well as Chinese emperors. Patrons were most often depicted at the bottom of a cave's murals and silk paintings.

Page 6

Patterning and Repetition

After Dunhuang became more isolated in the 10th century, the organization of a local painting academy led to mass production of paintings, creating a unique style. A common motif in many caves is an area covered by rows of small seated Buddha figures. These were drawn using stencils so that figures could be replicated.

Page 7

Decline and Rediscovery

As new maritime routes gradually replaced the ancient overland routes of the Silk Road, Dunhuang drew fewer travelers and the Mogao Caves fell into disrepair. By the eleventh century, most of the caves had been abandoned. It wasn't until the late 19th and early 20th centuries, that Western explorers began to show interest in the ancient Silk Road and discovered the treasures of the Mogao Caves.

Learn about the biggest discovery of all, the famed Library Cave, close to the gallery exit.

Page 8

The Mogao Caves Today

Discoveries made at the Mogao Caves have greatly increased our understanding of the Silk Road and the daily lives of those who traveled the routes over the centuries. This is why conserving the caves and the documents and artifacts found there is so important. Today, the International Dunhuang Project exists to coordinate and collect scholarly work on the Dunhuang manuscripts and other material. The caves themselves are now a popular tourist destination, with a number open to visitors.

C6.

Pair of Foreigners

China, Tang Dynasty (618-906 CE)

Earthenware

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert M. Snukal

1997.69.85AB

Although Chang'an was a cosmopolitan city during the Tang Dynasty, non-Chinese residents were seen as "foreigners", distinguishable through their clothing and physical features such as bushy facial hair. These figures depict two such "foreigners" that Chinese merchants, soldiers, and nobility would have come into contact with either in Chang'an or while traveling across trade routes.

D1.

What People Wore

Clothes revealed many aspects of someone's identity: colors, patterns, textiles, and embellishment techniques might indicate a person's place of origin, religion, age, and status in society.

Both men and women typically wore loose pants and long-sleeved shirts. Vests and coats were layered on top during cold weather. Hats differed among men, women, and children. To protect their feet during long journeys, people wore leather boots or moccasins.

Try matching up the merchant, the cave patrons, and the monk in the puzzle. How is their clothing similar? How is it different?

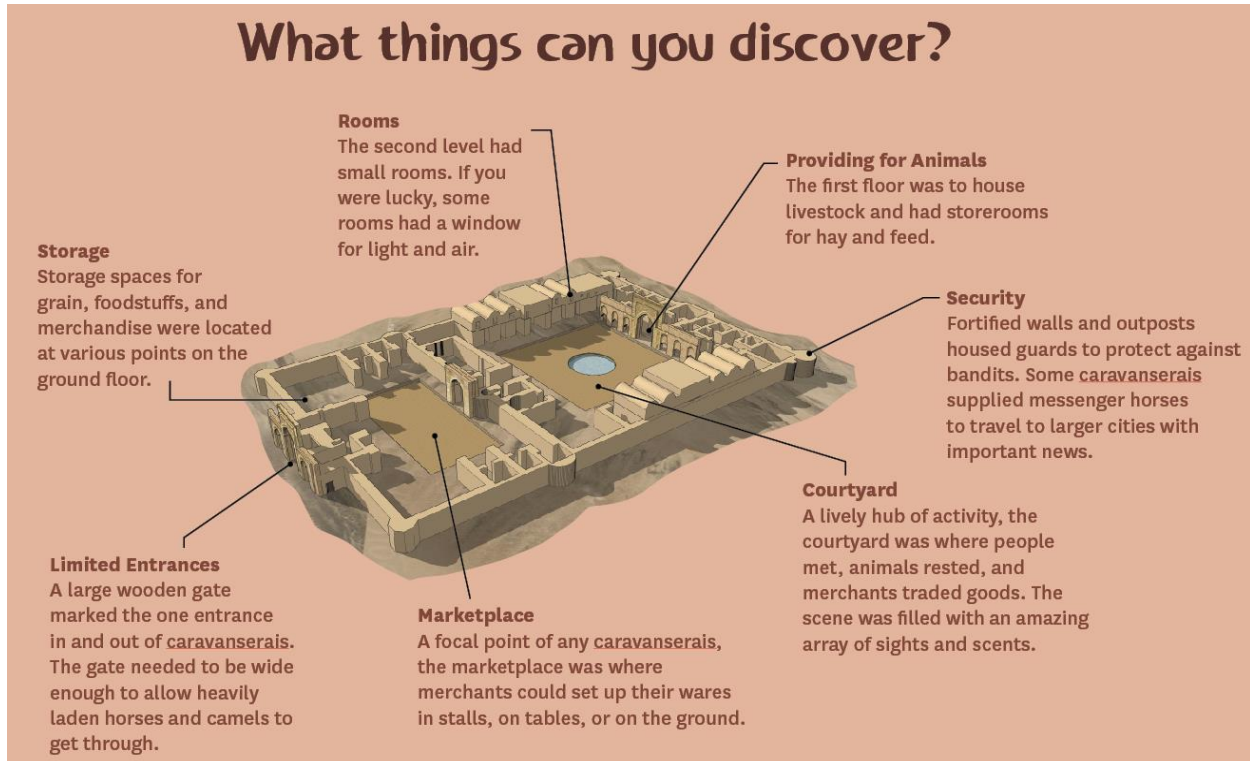
E1.

Caravanserais: Connecting Travelers and Ideas

At the end of a long day's journey, travelers either pitched tents or, in oasis towns like Dunhuang, they stayed in **caravanserais** (large stone guest houses similar to modern day hotels). Caravanserais served two main functions. They provided travelers with a safe place to rest. They also housed markets where merchants could sell and trade their goods. Generally situated within one day's travel of each other, caravanserais provided opportunities for traders to exchange their goods and share meals, music, and beliefs.

Imagine coming to an oasis town, like Dunhuang, and settling down for a night's rest after a long journey. There are many new people to talk to, share with, and learn from!

What things can you discover?



F1. Silk

This luxurious fabric is 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.

Head over to our story corner and learn the story of how Empress Xi Ling-shi discovered silk when a cocoon fell into her cup of tea!

F2. Reproduction of "The Four Kings Hunting Lions"

Japan, 1990s

Reproduction of 6th century textile

Silk

Gift of Jim and Jeanne Pieper

This is a modern reproduction of a treasured textile from the Asuka period in Japan (538 to 710 CE). This textile style was in high demand by nobility throughout the Silk Road regions. Originally made in the Persian Sasanian Empire, sophisticated silk textiles featuring animals enclosed in medallions surrounded by pearls were influential from Spain to Japan. The roundels seen on this textile were typical of Sasanian design.

F3. Flip Book

Page 1

The Process of Making Silk

The process for raising silk moths and harvesting silk thread is called sericulture. Scenes of the lengthy process were painted on this handscroll from the 13th century.

1. Silkworm eggs are prepared by placing them on trays that are stored vertically on a frame.
2. Hatched silkworms are then placed on trays with mulberry leaves on which they feed.
3. The worms are placed among the twigs on the frames to spin cocoons.
4. Cocoons are weighed and sorted, then placed in hot water to loosen the ends of the filaments.
5. Filaments are combined to form a silk thread and spooled.
6. Finally, the silk thread is woven into fabric.

Page 2

Still curious? Learn more about silk in the drawers below!

Page 3

The Secret of Silk

The Chinese were the first to discover that silkworm cocoons boiled in hot water caused the fibers to fall away and could then be spun into silk thread. For thousands of years, China managed to keep this secret and instituted a ban on the transport of silkworms and their eggs to other countries.

Page 4

Legend has it that the secret of silk got out of China when two Byzantine monks smuggled silkworm eggs by hiding them in bamboo poles around 550 CE. They presented the cocoons to the Emperor Justinian I, who developed a thriving silk industry in the Roman Empire.

Page 5

The Enduring Allure of Silk

The allure of silk fueled production of this material all over the world. Today, more than 60 countries produce silk, but the bulk of production is concentrated in only a handful of places: China, India, Uzbekistan, Brazil, Japan, Korea, Thailand, and Vietnam.

While parts of the process can be automated, the production of silk always relies on the basic boiling and unraveling of a cocoon, whose filaments can be turned into luxurious thread.

Page 6

Did you know?

During the time in which trade along these routes was active, there was no collective name given to the network of routes. The term “Silk Road” was created in 1877 by the German geographer Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen, referring to the highly sought-after commodity, silk, although many other prized goods were traded as well.

F4.

Silk comes from the cocoons of silkworm moths (*Bombyx mori*) who feed on leaves from mulberry trees (*Morus alba*) native to China. Silk was so valuable in China that taxes could be paid in bolts of silk cloth! Because silk was a form of currency, during the Tang Dynasty, 40 bolts of silk could be traded for a pony.

- It takes 200 pounds (91 kg) of mulberry leaves to produce one pound (0.5 kg) of raw silk!
- A silkworm spends 3–4 days spinning a cocoon around itself.
- Once degummed, each silk filament is 1,970–2,950 feet. (600–900 meters) long!

Head over to the story corner to discover the legend of Khan Atlas, the beautiful multicolored silk from Uzbekistan.

G1.

Ceramics

Ceramics are objects made of clay. They were valuable goods traded along the Silk Road. We often associate fine ceramic objects with China, which has been producing pottery since around 4000 BCE.

Trade had significant influence on ceramics as Chinese artists learned new forms, including the amphora from Rome and the ewer from Persia. As ceramics were traded, so were decorative motifs and styles of glazing. Chinese *sancai* (three color: amber, brown, and green) lead-glazed wares inspired craftsmen in Iran and the Byzantine Empire. The incredible white of Chinese porcelains also influenced the invention of a white glaze in Iraq, where potters began experimenting with blue ink drawings on a white surface. Trade of these ceramics back to China, together with cobalt from Persia, led to the development of Chinese blue and white porcelain that became an influential and in demand trade good across the world.

G2.

(Left to right)

Wine Set

China, Tang Dynasty (618-906 CE)
Earthenware with sancai glaze
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert M. Snukal
2000.34.19ABC

During the Tang Dynasty, both the drinking of wine and tea were communal activities. As Chinese territories expanded and interactions between different groups increased, perhaps people from different cultures sat together and used a ceramic set like this to celebrate or take time to relax at the end of the day.

Bowl

China, Tang Dynasty (618-906 CE)
Earthenware
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert M. Snukal
2001.43.28

Lobed bowls like this example were traded along the Silk Road, and were later extensively used in Syrian, Cypriot, and then Italian pottery, until the middle of the 15th century.

Ewer

Ming Dynasty; Jiajing period (1522–1566)
Porcelain; glaze
Gift of the Hon. and Mrs. Jack Lydman
1991.47.78

The shape of this ewer comes from the metalwork of ancient Iran. A ewer is 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.

Drinking Vessel (kendi)

China, Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), 15th century
Porcelain; glaze
Gift of the Hon. and Mrs. Jack Lydman
1991.47.11

This vessel is an example of blue and white ware. It shows the impact of trade in the combination of materials from Persia (blue) and China (white), design combining Persian and Chinese styles, and a shape originally made for export to Muslim communities in Southeast Asia.

By the 16th century, the vessel style became popular in the Middle East resulting in the production of Persian copies.

Head to the Snukal Gallery across the hall to learn more about ceramics!

Feel How Smooth I Am!

Do you know what makes porcelain different from other ceramics?

Porcelain is a type of ceramic that was first produced in China around 600 CE. What makes it unique is kaolin clay, found in abundance in southeastern 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 whiter ceramic. It became one of the most admired and imitated Chinese inventions marveled by the western world.

H1.

Jade

“When I think of a wise man, his merits appear to be like jade”

-Confucius, Book of Odes

Jade is 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. These physical characteristics are believed to connect to human virtues, or things that make people good. The great philosopher Confucius wrote that there are 11 virtues in jade, including justice, truth, loyalty, morality, and intelligence. China’s love of this material can best be described in the famous saying, “gold has value but jade is invaluable.”

The process for making detailed objects out of jade is known as abrasion, which relies on grinding, sanding, and polishing. In ancient times, artisans used special tools to abrade jade with sand. Even with modern machinery, working with jade is very laborious.

Learn more below!

H2.

Did you know that jade abrasion dates back to the Neolithic period?

Creating beautiful objects out of jade is an art that has been practiced in China for thousands of years. Craftspeople use special tools to grind and polish the stone from its raw form to the smooth, intricate pieces we see in jewelry, decorative wares, and tools.

Jade Carving

China, Han Dynasty (206-220 CE)

Nephrite

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. H. A. Meselson in memory of Mr. Barney Dagan
1984.61.1

Nephrite is an incredibly hard stone and working with it takes a great deal of skill. As technology improved, artisans were able to create increasingly elaborate designs in less time.

***Bi* Disk**

China

Nephrite

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert M. Snukal

2003.17.8

This disk is made from nephrite in a form that dates back to the Neolithic period in China (3400-2250 BCE). One of the earliest examples of the use of nephrite in China, *bi* disks were buried with the dead. The circle form is believed to have been a symbol of wealth and also associated with the sun and heavens.

H3.

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.

Imagine how much work goes into getting raw jade looking so smooth and polished!

Did you know that jade is not always green?

Jade can vary in color, from shades of green and lavender to white or yellow.

Ancient Techniques for Working Jade

(Left to right)

-Grinding agents, like sand, have been used since prehistoric times to work jade. Sands are diluted in water to create an abrasive mixture that is then dripped over the work area.

- Ancient tools for working jade are believed to have been fashioned from sharpened rocks, animal bones, bamboo tubes, or hard plant fabrics.

-These material were formed into flat saws, cylindrical bores, and string saws.

I1.

Map

Can you think of an item you use every day that originated in a different part of the world?

Items common to us today were traded on the Silk Road. Things we use or consume every day, such as paper or cinnamon, were once considered rare and valuable commodities! While there were many goods traded, we are focusing on silk, jade, ceramics, foods, and spices. Discover how trade influenced the way we experience these goods today.

Goods Traded West to East:

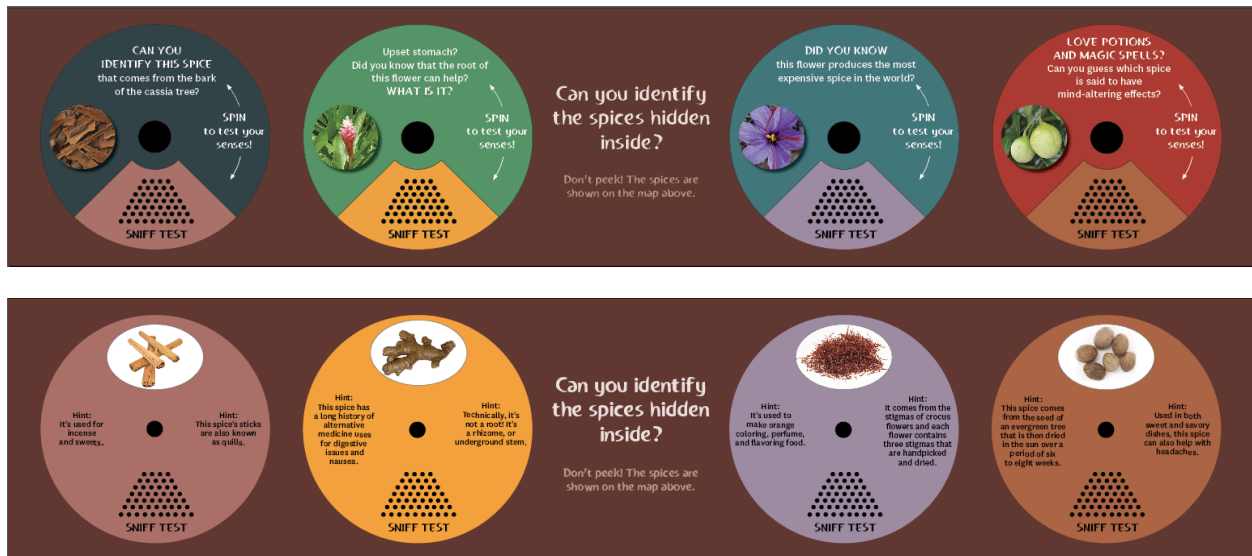
Horses, camels, dogs, sheep, goats, glassware, gold, silver, honey, carpets, animal furs, woolen blankets, saddles and riding tack, textiles

Goods Traded East to West:

Silk, tea, dyes, ceramics, jade, medicine, precious stones, bronze and gold artifacts, perfumes, ivory, rice, paper, gunpowder

12.

Spice Spinners



13.

Many popular foods, including dumplings and noodles, can be traced to Silk Road trade. The names and ingredients change from one place to the next, but they all have a shared history.

Which of the dumplings here have you tried?

(Top to Bottom)

Bao (China) – steamed and stuffed with fresh seafood, meat, or vegetables

Pelmeni (Russia) – boiled or fried, stuffed with ground meat like pork or chicken

Ravioli (Italy) – boiled, stuffed with meat, vegetables, or cheese

Gyoza (Japan) – steamed, boiled, or fried, stuffed with ground pork or cabbage

Samosa (India) fried or baked, stuffed with spiced potatoes, peas, or ground meat

Manti (Central Asia) – boiled, stuffed with ground beef, lamb, cabbage, potato, or pumpkin

Momo (Nepal) – steamed, traditionally stuffed with ground meat

14.

(left bowl, outside)

These noodles are made by hand, using a centuries-old traditional technique of stretching, folding, and pulling the dough. The length and thickness of the noodles depends on the number of times the dough is pulled.

Do you know what it is?

(left bowl, inside)

Lamian - Origin: China

These noodles are now eaten all over the world and serve as a base for many dishes. A popular meal made with hand-pulled noodles is Lanzhou beef noodle soup.

(right bowl, outside)

These noodles are made by folding and pressing a dough many times into flat sheets. The sheets can then be cut into long, skinny noodles using a knife or a machine.

Can you guess this pasta favorite?

(right bowl, inside)

Spaghetti - Origin: Italy

Many people believe the explorer Marco Polo brought pasta from China to Italy in the late 13th century. But historians believe pasta was already popular in Italy at that time. Arab descriptions of pasta in Sicily date to the mid-12th century.

15.

Food and Spices

Did you know that Silk Road trade can be credited for spreading many of the foods we love to eat today? Flat bread, for example, can be found in Iran, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and much of Central Asia, each country offering its own spin on this meal staple. Many fruits and vegetables we see at the supermarket today all originated in regions along the Silk Road, eventually making their way around the world through cultivation.

Can you find any of your favorite foods here?

16.

Food baskets

(From top, row 1, left to right)

Origin: Iraq

Fossil records show that the **date** palm has existed for at least 50 million years!

Origin: Asia Minor (Turkey, Armenia, Georgia)

Figs were brought to California by Spanish Franciscan missionaries in 1520, leading to what we now know as the “Mission Fig.”

Fun Fact! Figs blossom inside the fruit! Many tiny flowers produce the seeds that give figs their unique, crunchy texture.

(Row 2, left to right)

Origin: Iran to Northern India

Pomegranate trees can live for over 200 years and have been providing food and medicine across different cultures and civilizations for thousands of years!

Origin: India

There can be a 20 degree difference between the inside of a **cucumber** and the actual temperature outside. Is this why we say someone is “cool as a cucumber?”

(Row 3, left to right)

Origin: China

In Korean folklore it is said that the dried **persimmon** can scare away tigers!

The Tiger and The Dried Persimmon by Janie Jaehyun Park is in our library! See if you can find the book!

Origin: Western Asia and Eastern Europe

There are about 150 species of **cherry** trees. In Japan, cherry trees are selected for the beauty of their flowers and do not actually produce fruit

(Row 4, left to right)

Origin: Georgia and the Caucasus region

Grapes have been around for over 65 million years! The earliest archaeological evidence for wine making traces back 8,000 years to the region presently in the country of Georgia.

A man stands next to a giant qvevri pot in Kakheti, Georgia, in this photo from the late 1800s.

The beeswax- lined vessels have been used to make wine for thousands of years.

Origin: Asia

The world’s **onion** production is estimated at approximately 105 billion pounds (47 billion kilos) each year! Onions are so beloved that Ancient Egyptians worshiped them, believing their round

shape and concentric circles inside symbolized eternity. In fact, onions were often placed in the tombs of pharaohs, as they were believed to bring about prosperity in the afterlife.

J1.

Have you eaten yet? This is a common phrase in many Asian cultures and is a way to express hospitality and care for guests or visitors.

J2.

Languages along the Silk Road

While traveling along the Silk Road, people would encounter different nationalities and ethnic groups, most of whom would have spoken their own language and had their own writing system. At least 17 different languages and 24 different scripts, many of which are no longer in existence today, are represented in the scrolls and manuscripts found at the Mogao Caves. These **languages** included several versions of Chinese, Old and Classical Tibetan, Khotanese, Sanskrit, Sogdian, Old Uyghur, Old Turkish, and Hebrew.

(Fragment of Sogdian story, ca. 9th century)

An example of Sogdian writing. Sogdian is an extinct member of the the eastern branch of Middle Iranian languages once spoken in Sogdiana, a region that includes parts of China (xinjiang), Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Pakistan. Yaqnabi, a language spoken in Tajikistan, is thought to be a modern descendant of Sogdian.

Learn more about scrolls and writings that were found in the famous Library Cave and contribute to our community scroll at the gallery entrance.

How would you communicate if you didn't know a fellow traveler's language? How would you trade or sell, befriend, and welcome someone in the caravanserai?

K1.

Sunny's Story Corner

Sunny Stevenson

Margaret "Sunny" Stevenson (1924–2021) was a vital part of the USC Pacific Asia Museum since its founding. A Pasadena native, Sunny recalled visiting the Grace Nicholson Treasure House as a child with her mother and grandmother. The building, with its green curved roof and lush courtyard, caught her heart at a young age. When the Pacific Asia Museum was established in 1971, Sunny joined as a volunteer and carried a banner in the opening parade. Her first job was sweeping the courtyard!

Since then, Sunny served as an active member of the Service Council, which was established to support museum volunteers. As volunteer manager for ten years, she coordinated and trained others to provide staff and visitors with quality experiences and assistance. She spent the last two decades sharing her love of Asian cultures and storytelling by reading books for children during free days and special events. The original Silk Road Gallery, Journeys, was designed with

Sunny's reading in mind. In 2013, Sunny won the prestigious HALO Award from the Carl and Roberta Deutsch Foundation. She donated her portion of the award to the museum for the purchase of books for the children's library.

We dedicate the library of the Crossroads gallery to Sunny, for her continuous love and generosity toward the museum and every family that comes through our doors.

L1.

Sharing Stories, Music, and Moves along the Silk Road

Sharing stories is one of the oldest forms of communication between people. Stories allow us to experience the world through someone else's eyes and to enter distant lands, both real and imaginary.

Do you know the legend of how silk was discovered? Or the story of the Monkey King and the Dragon of Eagle Grief River? What about how the quails cooperated to fool a hunter?

Enjoy some of the many stories passed along the Silk Road. Use the QR code below to visit our website and read these stories in other languages.

Paintings in the Mogao Caves show us that music and dance were essential parts of Silk Road life. As cultures and religions mingled, travelers traded local and foreign musical traditions and instruments, which musicians adapted along the way. For instance, the **lute** is one of several musical instruments that was adapted and transformed by different cultures along the Silk Road routes.

Explore the instruments here and discover their origin and unique sounds!

Who are these flying beings?

The 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.

L2.

Oud

Origin: Middle East

In Arabic, oud translates to "wood:", which refers to the instrument's wooden soundboard unlike other instruments whose soundboards were made of animals skins, It was introduced to Spain by the Moors during the Middle Ages and was eventually adapted into the European lute.

Dunhuang Pipa

Origin: China

The pipa dates back to 4th century China. It was originally held horizontally, like a guitar, and was

plucked with a plectrum (or guitar pick). The word pipa refers to the plucking strokes: pi, “to play forward” and pa, “to play back.”

L3.

Flipbook

Page 1

Dancing Along the Silk Road

More dance styles are depicted in the Mogao Caves than at any other archaeological site on Earth. The wall paintings read like an encyclopedia of movement traditions spanning eight centuries. The paintings show us that dance absorbed influences and choreography from bordering Central Asian cultures as well as from cultures far away.

Huteng

Huteng was the Chinese term for a type of dance that originated in Central Asia. The dance was well known during the Tang Dynasty and was characterized by spinning, leaps, and back flips!

Page 2

Dancing with Silks

Chinese scarf and silk dancing, where dancers hold a scarf or silks, is one of the unique creative art forms to emerge from ancient Chinese dance. This highly expressive type of dance matured in the Han Dynasty (202 BCE–8 CE) and has a long history that has been passed down to the present day.

The Sogdian Whirl

The Sogdian Whirl was a popular dance in which one leg is lifted or extended and is usually performed on a small, circular felt carpet. The rigorous twirling dance became an element of Buddhist devotional practice as well as a staple of the Tang court’s dance repertory.

Page 3

A Musical Crossroads

The Silk Roads had traveling troupes of musicians, armies with drummers, and popular songs to dance to. Audiences would gather at tea houses, markets, caravanserai, and in imperial courts to listen. Paintings at the Mogao and nearby Yulin Caves, reveal a large variety of instruments, some of which are still played today.

Page 4

(Left to right, top to bottom)

Waist Drum, Pellet Drum, Flute, Pan Flute

Page 5

Guqin, Konghou (Harp), Pipa, Sheng

Page 6

Did you know?

The names of a number of stringed instruments with the root "tar" ("string" in Persian), comes from the tar instrument itself, including the dotar, dutar, lotar, setar, sitar, qitar, guitarra, and the guitar.

A tar is played with a pick or fingernail. The player sits down and places the instrument on their lap to play. Tars are made of mulberry or walnut wood, ram antlers, camel bone, and sheep skin and gut.

M1.

Exchange of Ideas, Religions, and Technology

Cultural exchange along the Silk Road was as important, if not more, as the trade of goods. We can credit encounters along the Silk Road for spreading new technologies, diverse religions, and ideas – even sports and games!

Trade and religion were intimately connected throughout the history of the Silk Road. Many of the great religions of the world traveled with merchants and devotees. The mingling of people from various cultures practicing these different religions was a kind of cross-fertilization that led to a depth of culture and connection that is still present in Asia today. Missionizing religions such as Buddhism and Islam were the most successful in creating new devotees and a widening influence along the trade routes.

Inventions by the Chinese, like paper, transformed western cultures that were still using animal skin to write on. Gunpowder, printing, the compass, and of course sericulture (or silk farming) were other highly influential inventions that spread from China to the rest of the world through trade.

Find out more about printing at our community scroll and spin the cubes below for other discoveries!

Browse through the books in our library and see what new stories you can discover about the Silk Road and different Asian cultures.

M2.

Spinning cubes

(Top row, left to right)

1. Sharing Beliefs

Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Judaism were just a few of the belief systems that spread across Asia through trade. Some of these faiths took root in Central and East Asia while others merely passed through.

Religious documents and surviving artworks tell us that practitioners of different faiths shared their beliefs with fellow travelers through storytelling, personal items, and rituals.

2. What is a sutra?

Sutra is the Sanskrit word for “thread.” Written texts became known as “sutras” because they bind together once oral teachings into a written form that connects one generation to the next.

As trade routes flourished, Buddhism developed into a major religion that appealed to people across Asia. Monks transcribed and expanded the teachings from the historical Buddha into sutras. They then shared these texts with others as they went to different locations and translated them into local languages.

3. Why Buddhism?

Where Did Buddhism Start?

Buddhism started in India. Prince Siddhartha Gautama (the man who became the Buddha) was born in the foothills of the Himalayas. He eventually gained enlightenment while seeking a path to end suffering. The religion created through his teachings adapted and changed as it spread but always maintained its core values of detachment and compassion.

Buddhist themes inspired many followers across different cultures.

These include: Finding salvation through exploration of ideal actions; Ridding oneself of delusion, anger, greed, and fear

(Center row, left to right)

1. Paper

Early Chinese paper was made from the bark of the mulberry tree. China perfected papermaking technology by experimenting with new materials. It was kept secret for many years until it eventually spread to Tibet and other parts of the world. The Abbasid Caliphate is credited for spreading paper making technology across Central Asia and Europe, establishing the first paper mills and enabling Europe’s High Middle Ages.

Does this paper feel the same as the paper you use everyday?

2. Games

Did you Know?

Playing cards were first used in China and were printed on bamboo strips, then narrow strips of paper. First mention of the game of cards appeared in the middle of the Tang .

Chess

This popular game has disputed origins. Some scholars believe it originated in India while others argue it was first played in China. As the game evolved and spread around the world, it adapted to fit each new culture while still retaining enough of the original to be classified as chess.

3. Fireworks

Fireworks were invented as a result of **gunpowder**. Stuffing bamboo stalks with gunpowder created a sort of sparkler and became an immediate staple in Chinese celebrations.

Did you Know?

Gunpowder was accidentally discovered by Chinese alchemists in the 9th century who were searching for an elixir that would grant immortality to humans! As it spread along the Silk Road, it became a key component in the creation of firearms, cannons, and eventually the combustion engine.

(Bottom row, left to right)

1. Navigating Land and Sea

The **compass** was invented in China sometime between the 2nd century BCE and 1st century CE. It was originally used for fortunetelling, not navigation! As the Silk Road routes developed on land and sea, navigation became more sophisticated and allowed merchants to travel long distances without getting lost.

2. Glass

Glass provides an important example of an invention that traveled from west to east along the Silk Road. Historians believe glass was first produced in Egypt and Mesopotamia as early as the 15th century BCE. By the first millennium BCE glass production became important on the Italian peninsula, becoming a significant export of the Roman Empire. Trade brought glass to China and eventually Japan via the maritime Silk Routes.

3. Mathematics

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

Modern mathematics developed as a result of interactions from across the Silk Road. Many of the mathematical principles we use today, such as numerals and the decimal system can be credited to mathematicians from the Arab Abbasid period (750 to 1258 CE). Avid translation from Arabic into other languages led to the spread of mathematics across Asia and Europe.

M3.

(Left to Right)

Polo Player

China, Tang Dynasty (618–906 CE)

Earthenware

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert M. Snukal

1999.59.54

Polo, a game played horseback, was probably introduced to China sometime between the end of the Han period (206 BCE–220 CE) and the early part of the Tang Dynasty (618–907). This game was popular throughout much of Asia. It was played by all classes of people, both men and women, but was a particular favorite among upper classes in the Tang Dynasty.

Head of the Buddha

Pakistan or Afghanistan, Gandhara region, Kushan Dynasty 4th century CE

Stucco with traces of paint

Gift of Mr. Paul Sherbert

1993.41.1

This head was once part of a full figure of the Buddha. It came from the region of Gandhara, an area that had great influence on the development of Buddhism as it spread outwards from India. This style of Buddhist sculpture was strongly influenced by Hellenistic styles from the Mediterranean world. Most of Gandharan Buddhist art was produced when the region enjoyed peace and prosperity as part of the large Kushan empire which controlled the trade routes linking China, India, and classical Greece and Rome. This helped Gandhara become central to Asian trade, commerce, and culture. This commerce led to the growth of cosmopolitan cities and a large merchant class, who along with the early Kushan kings provided the cultural climate and patronage for the development of Gandharan art.

Head of the Buddha

China, Tang Dynasty (618–906 CE)

Sandstone

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert M. Snukal

2000.34.4

As Buddhism spread across Asia, images of Buddhas and bodhisattvas were adopted together with religious beliefs and practices. This head from a Buddha sculpture features physical elements typical of Chinese Buddha images during the Tang Dynasty. How does it look different from other Buddha images in this gallery? How does it look similar?

M4.

Library Cave

Among the most prized of the 492 caves at Mogao is Cave 17, known as the Library Cave, because it contained some 50,000 manuscripts, scrolls, booklets, and paintings on silk, hemp, and paper. Inside, the scrolls and manuscripts were piled ten feet high!

Prior to its discovery by Wang Yuanlu, a Daoist monk who served as the caves' caretaker, the Library Cave was sealed up for 900 years. Its reopening in 1900 is considered one of the most important archaeological discoveries of the 20th century. Many of the manuscripts found were previously unknown or thought lost, and provided a unique insight into life along the Silk Road. Findings included scrolls that refer to goods that were produced and traded, almanacs, as well as texts regarding mathematics, music, and dance.

Browse through the books in our library and see what new stories you can discover about the Silk Road.

Did you know that only one-fifth of the documents found in Cave 17 remain in China? After the cave's discovery, many of its contents were acquired by Europeans. Today, an international collaborative effort called the International Dunhuang Project, works with museums and libraries around the world to digitally archive and bring the documents back together.

N1.

Be part of the exhibit! Write and draw your travel memories on our scroll as people did on the Silk Road.

Use the stamps below, much like those for woodblock printing, and tell us your story!

N2.

Block Printing: The Birth of the Book

Many of the scrolls found in the Library Cave were Buddhist, including scriptures known as sutras. These were sacred objects transcribed with great care and attention to detail. Donors paid for the sutras to be replicated and shared.

These copies were often accompanied by beautiful illustrations to make their teachings more accessible. The difficulty of hand copying and the risk it posed to accuracy led to the development a new technology: woodblock printing. The earliest instance of a woodblock-produced text, a manuscript of the Diamond Sutra dated to 868 CE, was found in the Library Cave. It is considered the oldest existing mass-printed manuscript.

Along with woodblock prints, stamps were used to reproduce images, such as a Buddha figure, the repeated application of which would be considered a religious ritual.

N3.

Where have your travels taken you? What did you learn and experience? Share your stories on our community scroll!