

## THE SILK ROAD AND BEYOND: TRAVEL, TRADE, AND TRANSFORMATION

September 30, 2006–April 1, 2007

Galleries 140–142

Note: Some works in these galleries will change. There will be three rotations: September 30–December 3, 2006; December 9, 2006–January 28, 2007; and February 3–April 1, 2007.

### Background

The Silk Road was an ancient network of trade routes that extended across Asia, linking powerful civilizations such as Rome and China. Evoking images of lush desert oases and distant crossroad settlements teeming with merchants, religious pilgrims, and adventurous travelers from many regions, the Silk Road has become in our time a metaphor for cultural exchange among people of diverse societies, distant places, and different religions.

*The Silk Road and Beyond: Travel, Trade, and Transformation* is an exhibition of works from the permanent collections of the Art Institute that vividly reveal cross-cultural connections. The exhibition includes a brief introduction to the technology of sericulture (the process of making silk) and to precious goods as diverse as silk, ceramics, and tulips, which were traded between Asia and Europe. Works selected were produced by artists who represent four continents and span more than 2,000 years.

In addition to the artworks on display in Galleries 140–142, the exhibition continues throughout the museum, where nearly 150 artworks that demonstrate international cross-fertilization are highlighted with special labels marked with the icon on the right.

Through their creations, these engravers, jewelers, painters, potters, print-makers, sculptors, and textile artists offer eloquent answers to the question, "What happens when strangers meet?"



### Introduction

The process of making silk (sericulture) which developed in China about 5,000 years ago is illustrated by selection of 18th-century Japanese prints, including [Women's Work in Sericulture, No. 9](#) by Kitagawa Utamaro. An [emperor's jifu](#) is a particularly fine example of a silk garment from China. European paintings, west Asian vessels, and textiles represent and depict other commodities that were traded between the East and West. [Special performances and demonstrations](#) will take place on a specially constructed stage located near these objects.

Contact among people of disparate cultures through travel and trade is illustrated with a range of blue-and-white ceramic wares, including a 15th-century Chinese porcelain, a 17th-century Delftware vase from the Netherlands, an 18th-century Talavera vessel from Mexico, and a 19th century painting depicting what is probably a Chinese export vase. In the 17th century, the Dutch developed their own ceramic industry based on blue-and-white Chinese porcelain made for export, as seen in [Vase with Cover](#). The central scene depicted on the side of this vase shows a mythical Chinese emperor seated among a crowded group of court officials. His hand rests idly on a globe of the world. This vase might be mistaken for Chinese porcelain, but it was made in the Netherlands.

The use of the blue color, derived from cobalt oxide, can be traced to pottery decoration by Iraq in the 10th century. The technology then spread to China, where blue-and-white porcelain decoration was refined during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). By the 16th century, maritime trade spread Chinese export wares around the world. The Dutch began to produce their own version of blue-and-white ceramics (Delftware), and Spanish ships brought Chinese export wares to Mexico, where potters in Puebla created their own unique version (Talavera ware).

Produced near the turn of the 16th century, a [blue-and-white vessel](#) embodies the theme of the exhibition, providing a good example of adaptation practices. The porcelain bottle was manufactured in China, probably for export to the Middle East. However, it soon made its way to England, where it was given silver mounts, including a handle, a lid, a foot, and a bird-headed spout, and was thereby transformed into a European-style wine-server. It thus serves as a particularly good example of cross-cultural conversion in function as well as appearance.

### Travel along the Silk Road

The Silk Road extended from China through Central Asia to the Caspian and Black Seas. ([Click here](#) for a map of the Silk Road.) Bounded by mountains to the north and south, this central corridor consisted of a broad desert punctuated by oases.

The animal most essential in crossing the overland caravan routes was the camel. Double-humped Bactrian camels from present-day Afghanistan were the primary mode of Silk Road land transport. Ideally suited for the rough, arid desert that stretched across Central Asia, camels could tolerate the cold temperatures of mountain ranges and long periods without water. [Camel with Rider](#) was created during the [Tang dynasty](#) as a burial object. This lively and colorfully glazed ceramic sculpture was crafted for a wealthy person's tomb. Exhibiting the camel's notorious bad temper, the animal is shown with his head thrown back and his mouth open to bray. The bearded groom is depicted with foreign facial features and wearing a central Asian or Persian coat.

## Trade

Powerful horses played a critical role in China's imperial desires to expand and maintain the Silk Roads. Luxurious and practical silks, whose raw material and technology of spinning and weaving were carefully guarded by Chinese craftsmen, were traded to nomadic rulers in exchange for their resilient steeds. Those rulers, in turn, exchanged Chinese silks for other goods. Through successive networks of sale and barter, Chinese silks eventually reached Rome and other centers of the Mediterranean world as early as the 2nd century A.D. Through military conquest and commercial trade, Chinese rulers later secured superior breeds of horses from Central Asia as well as China's northern and western neighbors. Immortalized in Chinese history, literature, and art, horses were vital to China's military defense and played an important role in imperial desires to expand and maintain the overland Silk Roads.

A Chinese sculpture, [Horse](#), is from the early 8th century, the height of the Tang dynasty. Notice how carefully the sculptor fashioned this proud and personable animal. Such realism is typical of the art of the Tang dynasty, and it also signifies the horse's increasing prestige. This figure was made to be buried in a tomb so the deceased might continue to enjoy life's pleasures in the afterlife. Its colorful lead glazes were applied after the form had been created with a reusable mold, with details manually applied. This semi-mass-production technique allowed artisans to keep up with the great demand for grave furnishings.

## Transfer and Transformation of Ideas and the Arts

Along with various goods, knowledge, techniques, cultural traditions, and religions also traversed the Silk Road. In particular, Buddhism spread across the Silk Road from India across China.

Early Indian representations of the Buddha and his followers, reveal influence from the West. This [Bodhisattva](#), an elegant 2nd–3rd century A.D. Buddhist sculpture from Gandhara (a region in present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan) depicts a man deep in meditation. A bodhisattva is an enlightened being who selflessly delays his own nirvana to be a spiritual guide to others. This bodhisattva's jewelry and rich garments indicate that he has not fully shed the material realm to achieve enlightenment and symbolize his enduring commitment to the human world. His right hand was likely raised in a *mudra*, or gesture of reassurance. An object in his left hand would have identified which bodhisattva he is.

His moustache and the skirt-like garment called a *dhoti* are Indian features, but the sculpture also incorporates Hellenistic elements. Hellenistic art, which coalesced in the centuries following Alexander the Great's conquests in the 4th century B.C., merged Greek and local styles. The Hellenistic influence is seen here in the treatment of the fabrics and the realistic musculature of the chest.

[Mandala Box](#), created in the 19th century in Tibet or Nepal, is an important symbol of Buddhism. It is a symbol of the heavenly and earthly realms and the order and harmony indicative of the way Buddhists imagine the divine realm and the state of the enlightened mind. In the center, the many-armed goddess Ushnishavijaya, a Buddhist deity of long life, sits in a temple at the center of a kind of spiritual maze. Ushnishavijaya's *ushnisha*—the topknot behind her crown—signifies her enlightenment. Between the outermost square and the first circle of the mandala are four majestic architectural gates that open to the cardinal directions—north, south, east, and west. The directions probably represent the progressive stages of spiritual perfection, and the eight steps that form the mandala recall Buddhism's eight-fold path to enlightenment. The artist created this mandala in sections, using a *repoussé* technique, where metal is hammered from the back and then the sections are assembled.

While the exchange of ideas and traditions influenced the production of artworks, raw goods that were traded along the Silk Road also were often used in the production of artworks. Among the commodities traded to the West from present-day Afghanistan was lapis lazuli, a brilliant blue semi-precious stone often bearing golden specks. In Roman times (1st to 4th centuries A.D.), lapis lazuli was a prized gemstone, but in the Middle Ages it was also ground to a powder and used as paint. In illustrated pages from a 15th-century Flemish manuscript of a religious text, *The Book of Hours* lapis lazuli is used for the blue garment worn by the Virgin Mary in scenes of the Nativity, the Adoration of the Magi, and the Annunciation.

## Global Exchange

In Jacob Ochtervelt's 17th-century painting of a Dutch interior, [The Music Lesson](#), the man and woman are posed before large map. The seated man plays a lute, which descends from the Persian *oud*. The other two instruments—the violin and the viola da gamba—are European inventions. The map shows Holland's 17 provinces as they existed in the late 1600s. In this era of the lucrative Dutch East Trading Company, the demand for sea charts and accurate maps produced an age of cartography. Although the map in this painting appears faded, original maps were intricate and richly colored. Many of them depicted the East and other foreign lands, signifying Holland's powerful shipping trade. The young woman's silk dress and pearls also show wealth gained from trade with the East.

Coming to power in the 15th century, the Ottoman Empire controlled much of Asia. With the Ottoman Empire occupying the middle ground of the Silk Road, trade between the farthest eastern points of the Silk Road in China and the farthest western points in present-day Europe was forced to rely on sea routes. This dependence on maritime trade spawned the European "Age of Exploration." European monarchies began to compete for the

fastest route to China; the Portuguese went east around Africa to India, while Spain sent Christopher Columbus west, ultimately leading to the realization that the world was not flat. Columbus's exploration of the "New World" in 1492 significantly sidetracked voyages to East Asia.

In [Seventeenth-Century Interior](#) by Chicago-born artist Charles Dyer, a blue-and-white porcelain vase from China stands on a table covered in a Persian carpet. These objects and the many other collectibles display their owner's worldliness and familiarity with Eastern cultures. Although the title is *Seventeenth-Century Interior*, Persian carpets and Chinese porcelain remained desirable commodities in the 19th century. By the 1870s, American collectors began to acquire porcelain and rugs as art objects rather than household furnishings. Dyer first worked as a diplomat in Beirut and then as an artist in Munich, where this painting was created in 1877. He also traveled extensively in the Middle East. This painting is reminiscent of Ochtervelt's [The Music Lesson](#), but the decorative objects in the painting—the instrument and sheet music, the rich carpet on the table and the wall, the porcelain jar with a floral design—show a setting of cosmopolitan, varied objects. In its conflation of things European and Asian, the painting recalls the centuries of exchange that had taken place along the Silk Road.

European maritime travel, combined with the rivalry between Russia and England for control of Central Asia, ultimately led to the demise of the historical Silk Road. Industrialization put the culminating stamp on the Silk Road with the completion of the Trans-Siberian Railroad in 1905, making caravan travel across Eurasia obsolete. Nonetheless, the exchange of traditions, heritage, cultures, religions, arts and ideas over the course of the Silk Road's 3000-year history ensure that the legacy of the Silk Road lives on today.