

UNIT 3: GLOBAL EXCHANGE
LESSON 1

Trade Along the Silk Road

Introduce the concept of trade by exploring materials and goods exchanged along the Silk Road



Lesson Overview

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Identify materials and goods that were imported to and exported from China
- Discuss a work of art to learn about Ferghana horses and why they were in demand
- Explore items that were traded along the Silk Road and think about their likely functions and value

VOCABULARY

<u>Import</u>	To arrange for materials or goods to travel into a country from another location
<u>Export</u>	To arrange for materials or goods to travel out of a country to another location
<u>Trade</u>	The exchange of materials or goods for other items or for money
<u>Silk Road</u>	A network of mostly land- and some sea-trading routes that stretched across the Asian continent from Japan in the East, westward across Central Asia and the Middle East, finally reaching Italy in the West

INCLUDED RESOURCES

- Silk Road map
- Touch objects (for physical toolkit): silk samples, tea, sandalwood

For the Teacher

Background Information

The Silk Road is a four-thousand-mile network of travel routes carved out by caravans (large groups) of travelers, merchants, and scholars between the second century B.C.E. and the fourteenth century C.E. Extending through East Asia (China), Southeast Asia (India), Persia, East Africa, and Southern Europe, the road and waterways made possible global trade between people from different parts of the world. Items that were commonly traded included textiles, raw materials (such as gold, silver, and cobalt mineral), tea and spices, porcelain, and animals.

Silk was one of the primary goods traded along the Silk Road, and was often used as a kind of currency. There were several advantages to using textiles as money rather than depending on coins, including their light weight, which made them easier to transport over long distances. A high demand for silk provided Chinese traders with significant buying power, stimulating rapid economic development and major expansion in regions along the Silk Road.

Horses also played an important role in the silk trade. Horses suitable for mounted warfare, which the Chinese government and military needed in great quantity for defense purposes and empire-building, were in short supply in China due to inadequate pasture land; as a result, the Chinese were forced to acquire them from distant regions, both aggressively through combat and peacefully through diplomacy and trade. The horses acquired by Chinese traders from Central Asia were called “heavenly horses” because they were believed to be the descendants of supernatural or celestial horses. They were revered in Chinese society, and became status symbols for their owners.

Artwork Description

Figure of a Horse with Saddle is a Chinese ceramic figure of a thick-bodied horse with a separate saddle. The horse is standing on all four legs without a base. The horse and saddle were molded of earthenware and hand-finished. The clay body was fired a deep, even gray color and the horse was painted with a deep reddish-brown pigment; it is also covered with an encrustation of soil from its burial. Both pigment and soil are flaking on the surface. The ends of an iron armature, or metal framework, on which the sculpture was molded, are visible on three of the four hooves. The realistic modeling of horses represents a long tradition in the use of the equine form in ancient Chinese funerary sculpture. In later periods, saddles became important decorative objects in themselves.



Figure of a Horse with Saddle, late 6th century. Earthenware, traces of pigment, 19½ × 22 × 5½ in. (49.5 × 56.0 × 14.0 cm). Brooklyn Museum; Gift of Peter W. Scheinman, 1999.138a-b. Creative Commons-BY. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

About the Artwork

Horses were highly prized in China. During the Han (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.) through Tang (618–907 C.E.) dynasties, military expansion to the far-western regions of the empire was spurred by the quest for horses, particularly the fast battle horses found in the region of Ferghana in Central Asia (incorporating parts of present-day Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan). Ferghana horses were more powerful than the Chinese breeds. Horses were exchanged in official trade, in which envoys brought gifts in exchange for political favors, and private trade, in which horses were directly exchanged for such products as silk, spices, and grains. Notably, however, while horses traveled along the Silk Road, they were not used as a mode of transportation—this heavy work was reserved for mules or camels.

Horses were also considered magical animals. “Heavenly horses” or “celestial steeds” were associated with the quest for the elixir of immortality, an herbal potion which might allow a person who ingested it to live forever. For this reason, horses were highly esteemed in ancient culture, adding to their economic and military value. The placing of horse figures like this one in tombs signified the high rank and status of the deceased, and was believed to provide a means of travel to the afterlife. This piece, from the late sixth century, reflects a long tradition of the realistic representation of horses in Chinese art and culture.

Lesson

STEP 1: 15 MINUTES

Introduction

Explain to students that they will be introduced to the ways in which people exchanged various materials and goods along the Silk Road.

Show students the map of the Silk Road and ask:

- Where do you see China?
- What other places do you see?

Explain that the Silk Road was a network of trade routes that connected the East and the West and was important to the economic, cultural, political, and religious interactions between these regions for almost two thousand years.

Explain that many types of goods were produced in China and distributed along these trade routes moving west. Different kinds of goods were produced in other countries and sold into China.

ACTIVITY

Break students into small groups, and provide each group with an item from the list of materials and goods exchanged along the Silk Road.

- Spices (such as cinnamon, ginger, and cardamom)
- Precious metals (such as gold and silver)
- Horses
- Camels
- Grapes
- Rice

On the board, draw a line labeled “Most Valuable” at one end and “Least Valuable” at the other.

Ask the groups to tape their goods where they think the items would fall on the spectrum. Once all the groups have placed their items on the board, ask them to explain their choices to the class.

STEP 2: 20 MINUTES

Artwork Discussion

Tell students that powerful horses were among the goods for which Chinese merchants often traded silk; they were in high demand because the land in China did not support the breeding of the large, strong horses needed for warfare.

Show students *Figure of a Horse with Saddle*, explaining that it is meant to look like a Ferghana horse—an especially prized breed of horse from the Ferghana Valley in Central Asia. Ask:

- What details do you notice?
- What words would you use to describe this horse?
- What might these horses have been used for?

Tell students that Ferghana horses became known as “heavenly horses” because of their quality as well as the idea that they were magical animals associated with the quest for the herbal potion thought to give immortality. This figure was made for a tomb, or a place where a person who has died is laid to rest. The horses signified wealth and power, and were also believed to transport the deceased to the afterlife.

Ask students to continue looking at the artwork while you read a poem about Ferghana horses, written by the poet Tu Fu in the eighth century:

The Ferghana horse is famed among nomad breeds.
 Lean in build, like the point of a lance;
 Two ears sharp as bamboo spikes;
 Four hoofs light as though born of the wind.
 Heading away across the endless spaces,
 Truly, you may entrust him with your life...
 —Tu Fu, Chinese poet (eighth century)

Ask:

- What details does the poet include about Ferghana horses?
- How do you think the artist or the poet feels about the horse?
- Do you see any of the poet’s details in this artwork? (Reread some lines if necessary.)

Explain that in ancient China, horses served as symbols of power, prestige, and wealth.

Ask: What about this figure shows these qualities?



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STEP 3: 10 MINUTES

Activity: Material Exploration

Explain to students that you are going to explore some other materials that were traded along the Silk Road.

Set up stations with the three different touch objects: silk, sandalwood, and tea.

Ask students to work in groups at each station and consider:

- What does this material feel like?
- What words would you use to describe this object?
- How do you think it was used and why?
- How valuable do you think this was on the Silk Road and why?

After a couple of minutes, ask each group to share some of their thoughts. Then provide background information about each item.

Lesson Extensions

SOCIAL STUDIES CONNECTION—TRADE ALONG THE SILK ROAD

Break students into small groups, and assign each group one of the materials or goods that was traded along the Silk Road. Ask the groups to research their materials or products, identifying where they came from and how they were used. Ask students to create an illustrated poster advertising the objects, including images and information they have discovered in their research.

ARTS CONNECTION—TEXTILE DESIGN

Pass out the silk samples and ask students what they notice about their weight and texture. Show them a video demonstrating how silk is made and explain that silks were often embellished with elaborate brocades, or patterns, to make them even more attractive. Ask students to practice drawing their own patterns and then select their favorite to decorate a textile (such as an old T-shirt or a piece of fabric) using permanent marker.

Cover:
Figure of a Horse with Saddle, late 6th century.
Earthenware, traces of pigment, 19½ × 22 × 5½ in.
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Gift of Peter W. Scheinman, 1999.138a-b.
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Support for the Arts of China Teaching Toolkit was made possible by the Freeman Foundation.

This resource was written by Michael Reback, Teacher Services Coordinator, and Jan Cohen, Curriculum Consultant, with assistance from Joan Cummins, Lisa and Bernard Selz Senior Curator, Asian Art, and the staff and students from P.S. 029 Bardwell, P.S. 321 William Penn, P.S. 015 Patrick F. Daly, and P.S. 032 Samuel Mills Sprole.

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