

## **Silk Road: Theme Tour - Elizabeth Black**

### **Order:**

Buddha from India.

Bodhisattva

Horse

Camel

Luohan

Guanyin (Song)

Nativity Tapestry

Jade

Incense burner with bird finial

Tang funeral objects.

Mei Ping vase

Ming candlesticks for temple.

Ewers influenced by Persian metal prototypes

Ming chair

Adelhausen tapestry fragment

Persian tile

Metal candlestick

Persian ceramics

Iznik

Vasco da Gama tapestry

Burgundian tapestry

Gypsy tapestry

### **History:**

Trade routes between earliest Chinese cultures and people to west from early times: Chinese silk from 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC in Siberia. The route to west was through Hexi corridor, led through mountain passes west of Xian (then Chang'an) into Wei and Yellow River valleys. By the end of 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC China dependent on jade imported along this route when own reserves ran out. Safety not guaranteed—a Chinese imperial envoy captured and kept prisoner for years—when he managed to escape he returned after visiting Ferghana and Bactria, bringing Ferghanan horses, Persian glass, silver and goldware. (126BC). Han dynasty sent soldiers to build and defend garrisons along the Hexi corridor as far as Dunhuang, at border of Gobi and Taklamakan deserts. Trade and tribute missions in and out

of China, where aristocracy developed a taste for foreign goods, sports, music, wine, dancing girls etc. Sogdians (Transoxiana) were the only people to travel the whole length of the Silk Road—most merchants went from home to a market and then returned. Sogdians went to Constantinople and China in search of trade. Samarkand began to prosper.

Dunhuang: a small town in Gansu province, W. China, lying on river Dang. City over 2000 years old. On junction where major trade routes split into N and S routes. Chinese conquered in 111 BC, and garrisoned and built extensive walls. By early 5<sup>th</sup> c. an itinerant monk excavated a cave near the town to meditate in.

**Trade** in horses, grapes, betel nuts, luminous pearls, striped shells, rhino horn, feathers; wild animals; ostriches reared in imperial park. Customs posts established during Han to prevent smuggling and perhaps tax. Han merchants had passports which said where they were going, and describe the goods carried.

The Silk Road developed in the 2<sup>nd</sup> c. BC as a result of military expansion. One branch goes to India, one to Russia and the third to the Black Sea. It is really a network of trade routes, which encouraged an amalgam of cultures. The central Asian trade included dancers, ostrich eggs, precious stones, musicians, jugglers, Persian textiles, Syrian glass, spices and perfume ingredients. Uighur families helped control route and supply of horses. Probably used for tax also. Han had bilingual coinage. Trade along Silk Road began to flourish during the Han. When dynasty fell, control over Central Asia diminished; Tang 618 re-established garrisons and customs posts. Tang outward looking and luxury loving. Xian had many foreign traders in city, Turks, Uighurs, Tocharians, Sogdians, Arabs and Persians; built own temples. Mosque survives. 'Office of Caravan Leader' controlled their affairs. Development of sea route also, but road continued to be used. Old camels knew when sandstorm coming, buried noses in sand; men took the hint and covered faces. Felt shoes, and baby carrier when camel gave birth *en route*. Bactrian camel main beast of burden in Turkestan for thousands of years; common in N China until 20<sup>th</sup> c.

Jugglers and acrobats from Persia imported. Possibly sold as slaves in Roman orient. They performed for emperor, and also in Public Square in Xian. More important were horses: major horse breeding nomads, and major feature of Han relations with them. Donkeys also appear: easier to breed in China, and popular.

ca AD 260 Chinese monk traversed Silk Rd to collect Mss. of holy texts. One monk spent 16 years away, collecting books in India. Early 7<sup>th</sup> c. a traveller thought Guanyin had protected him. She became object of special cult in China. In India bodhisattvas all male. Earliest guanyin in China had small moustache and beard. By Ming clearly female. Never had bound feet. Guanyin=compassion; more associated with female than males in China, hence perhaps the change.

(Chang'an)=Xian was capital, with 2 million inhabitants. Tang finished canal from Xian to Yangtse delta, which served primarily to transport rice and other foodstuffs. This was the beginning of large-scale trading in Asia. Industry in contrast to the agrarian society of the Han. In their heyday they traded with over 70 countries, including Japan, Vietnam, Korea in the East, Persia and W. Asia. Constantinople is the W. end of the Silk Road.

Letters, apparently from an abandoned post bag found at end of Great Wall, ca. 307-11AD. Refer to gold, musk, pepper, camphor, flax cloth & wheat. Responsible for taking alfalfa (horse food) and grapevine to China. Sold luxury goods to Chinese, imported special grapes packed in ice. Sassanian silverware from Persia had a huge influence on

Chinese silverwork, glass vessels and beads from Syria and Babylon, amber from Baltic, Mediterranean coral, brass for Buddhist images, purple woollen cloth from Rome. Bought silk, copied Chinese copper coinage, and used Chinese paper. Established papermaking in Samarkand in 8<sup>th</sup> c., whence it went to Europe.

Samarkand in Sogdiana NW of Silk Road from 2<sup>nd</sup> c. BC to the end of the Tang they dominated much of the trade on Silk Road. Their language, related to Aramaic became *lingua franca* along the Road. After they were conquered by Alexander the Great in 327 BC they turned to trade. Boys taught to read at 5; at 12 they went on their first trading trip to a nearby country. They were partly responsible for movement of religions: Manicheism, Zoroastrianism and Buddhism eastward. Trade mostly by land, but also sea. Pearls, tortoise shells, ivory and rhinoceros horns probably by sea.

Mongols control whole of Central Asia 13-14<sup>th</sup> c. Persia and China in touch, led to development of blue and white porcelain with cobalt from Persia; many early blue and white porcelains based on metal Persian prototypes. Chinese cobalt impure. Cobalt imported from Iran until good quality supplies found in China. Jade imported from Khotan. Own supplies had run out by first millennium BC.

Evidence from this collection: Buddhism and Islam. Little west to east influence, but plenty of trade existed.

Horses come from nomads on steppes. Had to be replaced, as didn't thrive in China. Lucerne imported to feed them. Donkeys did better.

Ming dynasty (1368-1644). During this time Islam changed from a recognised religion to a personal religion, since Ming began to persecute all non-Han. Chinese Muslims were not allowed to have exclusive customs, such as marriage, food, and clothing. Han were moved into predominantly Muslim areas in NW and SW China. At beginning of the period 75% were Muslims in Kashgar, changed to 41% ethnic Chinese, resulting in a modification of the culture of the area, Islam becoming a personal matter, no longer a community culture. This may explain the tolerance of alcohol, which was not banned at the beginning of Islam.

**Tapestries.** Nativity tapestry—wonderful fabrics deriving from Persian prototypes. Gypsy tapestry has gold striped silk, originally imported by Marco Polo, and only Chinese pattern found in Europe.

#### **Tang women figures:**

Change of fashionable shape: Yang Guifei, concubine to the Xuanzong emperor (ruled 712-56) very fat. In 7<sup>th</sup> c. slim figures, dresses with high narrow bodices and long narrow sleeves. In mid 8<sup>th</sup> c. they are fat, wearing central Asian dress, large padded turbans on head vs. hatless heads on earlier figures; long loose gowns. Upholstered slippers with high padded toes of a type found along Silk Road. After a military uprising and temporary banishment of Emperor the army decided she was a danger—killed either by strangulation or hanging from a peach tree, by imperial guard. Complicated story: Emperor took her from his son, then she fell in love with An Lushan, army general, who led uprising against emperor. May have been partly responsible for fashion for Central Asian things.

**Acrobat:** Persian slave, probably from a market in Syria

**Candlestick,** Ming dynasty, from a Persian metal prototype.

**Celadon pieces.**

**Bodhisattvas:** 3. Small 'brick' with Indian looking headdress (#36/680). Large wood, gesso and gilt 12 c. Song dynasty, male; small one in Chinese gallery.

Ewers of metal Persian type with floral design: Ming. #38/306: design from Persian metalwork.

**Incense burner** with opening lotus flower: shows Buddhism arriving during Han dynasty. Lotus open=full enlightenment and mental purity. Roots in mud, blossoms into beautiful flower (it's a waterlily). An individual may be impure, but has potential>enlightenment and perfect state. Open blossom=full enlightenment, closed=potential for enlightenment. Buddha associated with pink lotus; red lotus=love and compassion. Blue=wisdom. Buddhas and bodhisattvas often sit on open lotus.

Goose: harmony and unity; often in pairs: Buddhist symbol. Buddhism started in Han, but took off after 6c AD.

Lotus=Buddhist flower; goose also Buddhist.

**Chairs** from Asia Minor Roman or Byzantine. First mentioned in literature in 2<sup>nd</sup> c. AD 'barbarian bed'; originally used out of doors. Chairs with backs first during Tang; changed architecture, with windows placed higher on wall.

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Tapestry fragment with Islamic style pattern: 14<sup>th</sup>c. Adelhausen monastery. Cf. small Persian tile.

Pseudo-Botticelli: lines are Chinese.

### **Mei Ping vase.**

Made for An Nu'aman, a Muslim of Arab origin. A Chinese object with Arabic script. Many were made for Chinese Muslims and for export. This one probably made for Chinese Muslim. It is a wine bottle, and had a lid. Mei ping=plum blossom: name given to shape by 19/20c Chinese scholars.

Texts: goodness is the pure. The best of food is the permissible (halal).

Roundel: intoxication is for Nu'aman.

Square: thanks be to God.

Vase made for a rich man, perhaps an official at court. In preceding dynasty (Yuan) Muslims were in many professions, including medicine.

During the Ming period Sufi mysticism entered China and spread widely. Within Sufism references to alcohol were interpreted as dialogue between person and God, or worship of God.

Calligraphy: on this vase has the fluidity of Chinese style, looks more like brush strokes than reed pen.

Bilingual Muslims: Arabic or Persian for domestic and religious purposes, but obviously losing ground all the time.

Chinese/Islam influence on Persian and Turkish ceramics: cf. items in East gallery, imitation of celadon and porcelain.

Aramco website for archaeology and pictures.

Chinese influence on European porcelain: Bow octagonal plate with Chinese motifs, 1765; tea bowl and saucer 1800: Staffordshire decorated with Chinese pagoda and junk.

European influence on Chinese: Far end corridor leading to S. gallery: a collection of export ware for the European market, some of it possibly imitating Wedgwood.

**Camels:** Bactrian camels domesticated by 3c. BC. Used for news carrying. They have no symbolic value in art, they are just a trade animal. Caravans had one or two species of camels—the dromedary from India. Bactrian camels especially useful for cold areas of Central Asia: go easily on sand and snow; they can close their nostrils, and lose up to 25% of their water without suffering dehydration (humans: 2%).

The horse shows Persian (Sassanian) influence; attendant in Central Asian dress; also bought 1945 for £190. The harness, medallions, bridle cast separately.

Trade was of crucial importance for Tang. They conquered the W. Turks and small states in central Asia became part of China again.

**Luohan:** 'young man' disciple of Buddha. Saved for eternity: no more rebirths. Great wisdom, courage and supernatural powers. Ward off evil, so guardians of temples. 16 lohans: Tang added 2 more. Halls full of Luohans in temples. Buddhism integrated into Taoism in Han.

**Bodhisattva:** beings who have realised selves by putting aside own gain of liberation to work for the liberation of others. A being whose essence is perfect knowledge. Has only one more birth to undergo before Nirvana. An enlightened being who forgoes nirvana to save others.

Portuguese first reached China by Sea in 1516-7; fifty years later they were allowed to settle in Macao.

### **Middle Eastern ceramics:**

Octagonal plates derive from European silver prototypes from 1680 (one in daylight gallery).

Lobed Persian ewer, from metal prototype, cf. also Ming one.

**Jade.** Worked in China from Neolithic times. One of the main reasons for keeping western regions stable from W Han on was to secure supply of Jade: best comes from Khotan. Storms dislodged boulders of it, which were fished out of the rivers. Khotan in present day Xinjiang, China. A centre of Buddhism. Came under Chinese influence during W Han (206BC-AD 26).

Tang colours: cobalt blue lead glaze from beginning of 8<sup>th</sup> c. came from near East, probably in form of glass cabachons (sic) which could be ground down and fritted to mix with lead for glazing. Amber colour <iron, green<copper, both used in 7<sup>th</sup> c. stirrups prob invented in middle of first millennium AD.

The majority of silks exported to Europe in MA decorated with medallions, animals facing each other, often in medallions endlessly repeated. Also debased calligraphy. Absence of purely Chinese decorative elements shows that at the time exporting raw silk

Golden stripe silks prob intro by Marco Polo, swiftly copied—the only Chinese motif introduced into Europe. Other, traditional patterns never, which suggests that the silk was not coming from China but Persia.

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