

The Silk Road

The historical Silk Road was a series of trade routes that crisscrossed Eurasia for almost two-thousand years, until about the year 1500 C.E. While its name suggests routes over land, Silk Road sea routes were also important for trade and communication. The extent of exchange of art, ideas and innovations between cultural groups trading on the routes is illustrated by the eighth-century Shôsôin collection of artifacts. Culled by a Japanese emperor, it contains luxury goods from the Mediterranean, Persia, India, Central Asia, China, Korea and Japan. By the 16th century Europe was trading along the Silk Road routes, as well.

Over the centuries, many important scientific and technological innovations migrated to the West along the Silk Road, including gunpowder, the magnetic compass, the printing press, silk, mathematics, ceramic and lacquer crafts. Eastern and Western string, wind and percussion instruments also traveled between regions and had strong influences on one another over time. Among other instruments, the Shôsôin collection contains lutes from India and Persia. The Persian mizmar, a reed instrument, appears to be an ancestor of the European oboe and clarinet. Cymbals were introduced into China from India, and Chinese gongs made their way to Europe.

Resources, information and innovations were exchanged between so many cultures over so many hundreds of years that it is now often difficult to identify the origins of numerous traditions that our respective cultures take for granted. In this way, the Silk Road created an intercontinental think tank of human ingenuity.

Why the Silk Road?

This historic trade network provides a namesake-worthy metaphor for the Silk Road Project's vision of connecting artists and audiences around the world. Yo-Yo Ma has called these routes, which resulted in the first global exchange of scientific and cultural traditions, the "Internet of antiquity." The Silk Road Project takes inspiration from this age-old tradition of cross-cultural exchange.