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Arts of the Silk Road

The travel of artistic motifs, styles, and techniques along the Silk Road is closely bound up with the larger context of the travel of beliefs, ideas, and technology. For example, the art of the Silk Road includes the devotional art of Buddhism and Islam, the ideas behind certain styles of art such as narrative murals, and the technology to produce various works of art, including gigantic statuary and printed pictures. Religion is an important inspiration for art everywhere, and much of the art of the Silk Road was religious in origin. This includes not only the extravagant visual art of Buddhism, which created a legacy of thousands of statues, murals, and illustrated texts across much of Central and East Asia, but also the glazed tilework of Islamic mosques, which stresses calligraphic, geometric, and other nonrepresentational artistic motifs. Though much of the art of the Silk Road was created to encourage religious devotion, today we value it also as a source of precious historical information. Buddhist cave murals often, for example, yield a wealth of incidental information about ancient clothing and architectural styles, pastoral and agricultural practices, and much more. Similarly, many of the figurines produced in Tang China for burial in tombs as grave-goods for the use of the dead are of great historical interest today because they depict "exotic" foreign visitors from Silk Road countries.

By far the best-known art of the Silk Road is the Buddhist art of murals and statuary in temples and grottoes across Central Asia and into northwestern China. But as justly famous as this Buddhist art is, it is only one of many types of art that have flourished or been transported along the Silk Road over the centuries. Artistic artifacts and influences of many cultures, in many media and in many styles have traveled in both directions along the Silk Road, and have exerted their influences over surprisingly long distances. In addition to sculpture and pictorial art, the art of the Silk Road includes textiles, ceramics, metalwork, glass, and a wide variety of decorative techniques applied to objects of beauty and utility.

In this section we will consider only a few examples that illustrate the range and complexity of the arts of the Silk Road.

Objects and new styles were traveling across Asia at the beginning of the Common Era. A mirror from India with an ivory handle carved in the shape of a female fertility deity was buried under volcanic ash at Pompeii in 79 CE. Among the first images of Buddhist deities in human form were those carved in the province of Gandhara (part of present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan) in the second century CE. Unlike anthropomorphic Buddhist images carved farther south in India, these Gandharan figures, which were based on provincial Roman models, wear heavy, toga-like robes and have wavy hair. The figural tradition of Buddhist art spread through Central and East Asia and also to Southeast Asia, taking on local and regional characteristics.

Chinese landscape painting has part of its roots in Buddhist pictorial art as well, notably the background settings created by Buddhist muralists and wood-block printers for picture-stories of the life of the Buddha. The polychrome conventions that originated in Buddhist pictorial art merged with the indigenous Chinese landscape vocabulary of Daoist paradise painters also. Chinese landscape motifs made their way west along the Silk Road to Persia, where the landscape backgrounds, showing a layered-plane treatment of mountains with hard outlines and the trees silhouetted on mountain ridges, became prominent features of Persian miniatures.

Textile motifs traveled rapidly in both directions on the Silk Road. The typical Persian roundel figure (often featuring two animals face-to-face inside a circle of dots, a motif that itself is a legacy of the animal style art of the steppe tribes) on printed or woven textiles was taken up by Chinese weavers during the Tang period, both to cater to the export market and because it became stylish in China as well. Ikat weaving, a technique that produces a pattern in cloth by dyeing the warp and/or the weft threads before they are woven into cloth, originated in India and traveled both to Persia and western China. The ikat weavers of the large Jewish community in Bukhara practiced their difficult craft until very recent times, and attempts have been made to revive it today.

The ancient Chinese were adept at a great many applied and decorative arts, but inevitably some were emphasized more than others. The Chinese had no tradition of glassware until the fifth century CE, and even then imported glassware (a specialty of Egypt and the Arab cities of the Middle East), which was of superior quality, continued to find an enthusiastic market in China. But the heaviness and breakability of glass made it difficult to transport overland on the Silk Road; not very much ever made it to China, and it was very expensive when it reached the Chinese market. Gold and silver metalwork, another Middle Eastern specialty, was imported into China in great quantities, especially during the Tang period. Many gold and silver cups, bowls, jugs, and other fancy utensils have been excavated from Chinese tombs, and often they are decorated with typical Middle Eastern motifs such as griffins, deer, carnivorous beasts, and other animal-style art. Later indigenous Chinese metalwork often showed

stylistic influences from these earlier imported pieces.

Another example of an artistic tradition that traveled the Silk Road is blue-and-white porcelain, which was produced in China from about the thirteenth century CE onward. Islamic potters decorated early (post-eighth century) tin-glazed vessels with cobalt. Muslim merchants in Chinese coastal cities introduced the Islamic cobalt-decorated ware to China. In the late thirteenth century potters in South China began decorating white porcelain vessels with cobalt blue. Until the fifteenth century most of the Chinese blue-and-white porcelain was exported to Southeast Asia and the Middle East, where it was copied, although not in porcelain. In the fifteenth century the Chinese court embraced blue-and-white porcelain, encouraging domestic use. There were reciprocal elements in this trade as well, both because Chinese manufacturers often decorated export blue-and-white porcelain with tulips, pomegranates, Arabic script, and other motifs designed to appeal to a Middle Eastern clientele, and because the best cobalt-bearing pebbles for producing the blue glaze—the deep blue tint called "Mohammadan blue"—came from rivers in Central Asia, and were transported by caravan to China for processing and use.

Reources:

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