Lesson Plan: The Silk Road
Provided by the Art Institute of Chicago Department of Museum Education

Suggested grade level: 7–10
Estimated time: 2–3 hours

Introduction
The "Silk Road" was an ancient network of trade routes that extended across Europe and Asia, linking powerful civilizations such as China and Rome. The Silk Road flourished from about 1500 B.C. to A.D. 1500 and extended from China through Central Asia to the Caspian and Black Seas. Bounded by mountains to the north and south, this central corridor consisted of a broad desert punctuated by oases.

Silk actually composed a relatively small portion of the trade along the Silk Road. Eastbound caravans brought gold, precious metals and stones, textiles, ivory, and coral; while westbound caravans transported furs, ceramics, cinnamon bark, rhubarb, and bronze weapons. The oasis towns that made the overland journey possible became important trading posts—commercial centers where caravans would take on fresh animals, goods, and merchants. These cities prospered considerably, with merchants and traders making large profits on the goods that were bought and sold. Most traders sold their loads to middlemen who would make the final transaction further down the line. Very few caravans, including the people, animals, and goods they transported, would complete the entire route. Instead, goods were passed along through an intricate network of middlemen. These businessmen had to contend not only with the usual concerns of supply and demand but also sandstorms, ice storms, thieves, and feudal warlords.

Travel along the Silk Road was very difficult and extremely dangerous. Dry deserts with no water for miles and mountain passes with avalanches, heavy snow, and spring flooding made the road perilous at all times of year. Bandits lay in wait to rob travelers. To protect themselves, traders often traveled in large groups. Traders often used camels to travel the Silk Road and carry their goods from one place to another, because camels could travel a long distance without water. But camels could not carry extremely heavy goods over the mountains and across the deserts. As a result, the Silk Road was not used to carry raw materials, such as lumber. Instead, it was used primarily to transport small, luxury goods such as silk and porcelain.

Lesson Objectives
• Learn about the geography and topography of China and surrounding countries
• Discover how ideas, cultures, and goods were exchanged through the Silk Road
• Relate the ideas of trade and globalization to today
• Produce creative writing
Key Terms

- Silk Road
- globalization
- topography
- geography
- caravan
- bazaar
- oasis

Instructional Materials

- Dish with Europeans Playing Musical Instruments (http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/exhibitions/Chinese/Dish)
- Outline map of Asia (http://geography.about.com/library/blank/blxeurasia.htm)
- Silk Road web unit (http://www.artic.edu/aic/exhibitions/silkroad/themes.html)
- Map of the Silk Road
- Teacher Self-Guide for Silk Road
- colored pencils or crayons

Procedures

Discussion

- Explain to students that goods were often traded between China, the Middle East, and Europe via the Silk Road. Tell students that the Silk Road was a vast network of trade routes that traversed Asia from 1500 B.C. A.D. until 1500. Explain that traders would travel the Silk Road routes on camels and in caravans. Tell students that ideas, art, and religious beliefs were also exchanged due to the contact between different cultures.
- Review the description of Dish with Europeans Playing. Show the object to the students. If using the web to view the object, take advantage of the close-up view.
- Either as a class or in small groups, read the introduction of The Silk Road and Beyond: Travel, Trade, and Transformation web unit (http://www.artic.edu/aic/exhibitions/silkroad/themes.html).
- Guide a discussion about Dish with Europeans Playing and how it shows a dialogue between China and Europe. What about the dish is Chinese? (Possible answer: the production of blue-and-white porcelain) How does the dish show a
dialogue between Europe and China? *(Possible answer: the people on the dish are wearing typically European clothes)* What about the dish shows a relationship between China and the Middle East? *(Possible answers: the cavetto design of the plate; the blue pigment used in Iraq in the 10th century)*

- Guide a discussion about the idea of globalization and trade. Discuss how, along with the trade of goods, the Silk Road allowed for the transfer of ideas, knowledge, techniques, cultural traditions, and religions. *(Read the “Transfer and Transformation of Ideas and the Arts” section of *The Silk Road and Beyond: Travel, Trade, and Transformation* for more information.)*

**Activity 1**

- In groups or in pairs, have students research the geography of Asia and the Middle East using atlases, globes, or the Internet. On the blank map (http://geography.about.com/library/blank/bxeurasia.htm), have students outline and label the following modern countries: China, Mongolia, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Jordan, Israel, Egypt, Myanmar, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Saudi Arabia. Have them label the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea, and the Mediterranean Sea.

- Using the Silk Road map or the library, have students research routes of the Silk Road. Have students draw one or more of these routes on their maps.

- Using *The Silk Road and Beyond: Travel, Trade, and Transformation* or the library, research goods and ideas that were traded on the Silk Road. Where were goods imported from? If possible, have students draw those goods in the appropriate countries on their maps. *(Possible answers: silk, gunpowder, and porcelain from China; cavetto design and blue pigment from Persia/Iran; horses and precious stones from Central Asia (Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan); Bactrain (two-humped) camels from Afghanistan; sugar and medicine from India; jade from Mongolia; gold from Rome; etc.)*

- Display student maps in class.

**Activity 2**

Have students write a travel journal entry as if they were a participant in trade along the Silk Road. Are they a traveler in a caravan, a merchant at an oasis outpost, or a missionary? What do they trade? How do they travel? Where are they from and where are they going? Have students describe the sights, sounds, people, and adventures they encounter on their journey.
Evaluation
Base students' evaluations on their understanding of the Silk Road, globalization, and trade as expressed through their maps and/or essays.

Follow-up Activities
Have students research what goods and services are imported and exported between China and the United States today, and ask students to present their findings in class presentations or in a short research essay. How are goods and services traded today? How is that different from the time of the Silk Road?

Suggested Websites
- “Why Does China Matter?”
  http://www.twq.com/04winter/docs/04winter_sutter.pdf
- USDA Export Requirements for Chinese Goods

Glossary
bazaar (n)
a market consisting of a street lined with shops and stalls, especially in the Middle East
caravan (n)
a company of travelers journeying together
globalization (n)
a process enabling economies and markets to operate internationally
oasis (n)
a fertile or green spot in a desert, made so by the presence of water; a refuge

Illinois Learning Standards
English Language Arts: 1C, 3A, 3B, 4B, 5A, 5B, 5C