



by Mindy Weisberger

You may not be lucky enough to have a stash overflowing with cashmere and qiviut but even so, you're probably enjoying more luxury items than you might think. Did you sip a cup of tea this morning? Do you dress in silk or linen? Have you seasoned a recent meal with salt, pepper, or nutmeg? It's easy to take these items for granted – they're affordable and readily available, usually as close as your local mall or neighborhood supermarket. But that wasn't always the case. For thousands of years, these and other similar items were luxury goods, associated with exotic and faraway locations. Where they were available at all they appeared in select markets in limited quantities, and then only after journeying many months across China, Persia, and India. You might find this world hard to imagine; luckily there's an exhibit at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City that brings it to life. *Traveling the Silk Road: Ancient Pathway to the Modern World* will lead you on a virtual road trip where you'll encounter the goods that were traded, the vast network of roads they traveled, and the significance of the cultural exchanges that happened on these thoroughfares over time.

The name "Silk Road" was coined by a European in the late 1800s but the traffic along its routes was greatest from the seventh through the thirteenth centuries, the period covered in the exhibit. Visitors are guided through four cities that were the main centers of trade on the Silk Road: Xi'an, Turfan, Samarkand, and Baghdad. The exhibit's first destination, Xi'an (then known as Chang'an), was the capital of Tang Dynasty China, a teeming metropolis with over one million people living inside its walls. Famous for its silk production, Xi'an boasts a rich history described through artifacts, graphic panels, and media representing and describing silk production; the exhibit section is decorated with shimmering examples of the luxurious fabric itself.



Cases containing live silkworms underscore the humble origin of silk – the cocoons of *Bombyx mori*, the domesticated silk moth. Behind these cases towers a replica of a Tang-era draw-loom, created for the exhibit by the China National Silk Museum in Hangzhou. Its dimensions are impressive; nine-and-one-half feet high and seventeen feet long. And yet it still wouldn't quite measure up to the original loom after which it was modeled, which is twenty percent larger. A silk-weaving expert accompanied the deconstructed loom to New York and assembled it in the gallery. As a final touch, a bolt of partially woven cloth was attached, serving as a permanent work-in-progress. Visitors can only imagine the time and effort involved in creating such intricate material.



How do we get from silkworms and cocoons to woven fabric? An explanation is available nearby, in a video featuring sericulturist and weaver Michael Cook. Creator of the silk-centric website [www.wormspit.com](http://www.wormspit.com), he describes his first-hand experience with every stage of the silk-making process. “Sericulture,” he explains, “is the science of raising silkworms and working with silk. And for me it encompasses the whole thing. I start with the caterpillars, I raise them and breed them for characteristics that I want, and I work with the silk to make finished products.”



As a modern crafts person embracing ancient techniques, he modifies them to accommodate contemporary conveniences and technology. But the basic methods of preparing the cocoons and reeling the silk thread are fundamentally the same as they were in ancient China. “Because I’m working by hand,” Cook notes, “I tend to do things the way they were done a hundred years ago more often than I do things the way they’re being done in factories now.” In fact, video footage of his cocoon preparation and reeling are intercut with animations of a twelfth-century scroll on silk-making (also on display in the exhibit), emphasizing the similarities.



Cook may raise his silkworms in Tupperware containers on a bookshelf, degum his cocoons in a kettle on an electric hotplate, and reel them in his living room from a crockpot, but the images from the scroll show Chinese silk workers performing actions that are unmistakable in their similarity. And for Cook, there's a great personal pleasure in taking the process from start to finish. "It's an agricultural technique. It's an artistic technique. It allows me to do expressive work. And for me, the most important thing about sericulture is the fact that I can raise my own fiber, make something out of it, and create a piece of artwork that is my own and uniquely my own. And being able to make that project completely from the silk that I've made is very satisfying."



Once the silk-makers in ancient Xi'an completed their own painstaking work, where did the finished silk go from there? Much of that precious fabric was destined to travel great distances. Caravans often labored for the better part of a year over treacherous terrain all the way to Baghdad, braving extreme heat and cold, dodging ruthless bandits, and wrangling cranky camels. And silk wasn't all they transported; spices, medicinal herbs, metalwork, glass, ceramics, and paper all crisscrossed the Silk Road. But in terms of historical impact, the most influential commodity of this vast trade network wasn't cargo at all; it was ideas. Intentionally or not, merchants, traders, and pilgrims of the era formed the first information superhighway, sharing and spreading languages, folklore, technology, religion, and scientific knowledge as they traversed Asia and eventually Europe. The exhibit winds its way from Xi'an through other destinations on the overland routes, tracing the distribution of Islam and Buddhism alongside the growing study of

astronomy and mathematics, examining motifs in art and decorative objects that originated in one part of a continent only to resurface in another, thousands of miles away. Silk Road guides visitors through the development of maritime routes in the twelfth century and eventually leads them to the present information superhighway – the Internet. At the exhibit's conclusion, visitors are encouraged to take a turn at interactive stations to examine how ideas are exchanged today, at the speed of thought and with the click of a mouse, and to compare this to the exchange of ideas in the past.



While the story told in Silk Road begins with silk, it doesn't end there. Ultimately, this exhibit is about connections – between individuals and between cultures. And it's a story that still resonates with inhabitants of our swiftly shrinking world. From ancient trade routes to the virtual marketplaces of the Internet, people everywhere continue to seek, discover, and sample the unfamiliar, the exotic, and the simply beautiful, stimulating their minds and senses. The same way that silk transforms from individual threads to woven fiber, so too do individuals come together to form a global "fabric" of shared interests and experiences – then and now. A glimpse into the ancient world of the Silk Road provides unexpected insight into the connections we continue to form across cyberspace today.



"Traveling the Silk Road: Ancient Pathway to the Modern World" is on view at the American Museum of Natural History through August 15, 2010. To learn more about the exhibit, visit [the museum's website](#).

*Mindy Weisberger has been producing media for the Exhibitions Department at the American Natural History Museum for almost 10 years. She says "While I've worked on a lot of interesting projects, it was especially fun to apply a personal interest in fiber to the creation of an exhibit video. Silk has always been one of my favorite fibers, and it was great to meet and learn from the talented and knowledgeable craftspeople who worked with us on the show." Originally a blogger at [Gidget Casts On](#), her new website is a work in progress. In the meantime, many of her videos can be seen on [Vimeo](#).*