I. Course Description

This course explores the history of the Silk Roads through the objects that moved across the trade routes. Organized around the theme of “portability,” each week we will examine a different traded good, such as glass, gold and silverware, and textiles. We will rely on these “things-in-motion” to provide the routes for understanding the migration of people and ideas. Through the circulation of these portable objects and the movement of mobile bodies, cultures situated along the Silk Road came into contact with new ways of seeing and making that spawned innovations in glass blowing, metalwork, and weaving. Our task in this course is to assume the multiple roles of historian, archaeologist, and museum curator as we explore how portable “things” connected people across time and space.

Course website: http://goldenageofportability.weebly.com

II. Course Goals

- To gain an understanding of the broader themes, historical narratives, and theoretical questions found in the modern study of the Silk Roads.
- To engage with a wide variety of literary, visual, and material sources in our exploration of the Silk Roads as a site of cross-cultural interchange.
- To cultivate the research and analytical skills necessary for an interdisciplinary approach to the study of objects and material culture.
III. Assignments and Method of Evaluation

Your grade for this course will be calculated as follows:

(1) Engagement
Each member of this seminar is expected to attend every class, come prepared, and actively participate in discussion. Preparation for class involves completing the required readings and submitting thoughtful responses each week. In discussions, you will be asked to participate by asking questions, posing arguments, and responding to your colleagues’ points of view. Come to class having thought about the material, made notes of what interested or surprised you, and be ready to discuss it.

History Department Policies on Attendance & Communication
Students are required to attend all classes. Unexcused absences will result in a lower grade for the course. If you are having a medical or personal emergency, please contact the Dean’s Office as well as the instructor of the course. It is your responsibility to inform your instructor as soon as possible. It is essential that you check your email on a regular basis since I will contact you via email. I also expect you to use email to contact me.

(2) Think Pieces
For this class, you are required to submit weekly one-page response papers (double-spaced, 12 pt. font, one-inch margins) to the assigned readings. You should not summarize the week’s readings. The think piece is a space for you to work through the readings by critically engaging the author’s arguments and raising questions for class discussion. A successful think piece: 1) synthesizes the author’s points (What was the author’s main argument? What is her evidence? Is the argument persuasive? How does the reading relate to the themes of the course?); and 2) contributes a new perspective on the week’s theme or proposes critical issues for class discussion. Due on the Mondays before our class meetings, by 7pm. All responses must be submitted through the course website. Late think pieces will not be accepted.

(3) Presentation and Discussion Facilitation
Each week, one student will be responsible for leading and facilitating a class discussion by presenting analysis of the readings (10 minutes), commenting on the think pieces posted by fellow classmates (5 minutes), and posing questions for discussion. Presenters must submit an outline of their in-class presentation by the 7pm deadline, but will not be required to submit a think piece.

(4) Midterm Project: Object Study
An object study takes an individual object or a class of objects (for example, coins) as a guide to understanding the history of social interaction and cultural relations that might be embodied in the object’s production and consumption. To help us better explore how objects facilitated cultural exchange, this assignment calls upon you to show how objects illuminate the social and cultural context in which they circulated. More specific guidelines to follow.

Due on Tuesday, March 4th, by 5pm. (6-8 pages; formatting requirements: double-spaced, 12 pt. font, one-inch margins)
(5) Final Project: “Exhibition” Catalogue

For the final project, you will be asked to collaborate with your classmates to curate a museum-style catalogue on the course’s theme of portability. Each student will contribute one essay that builds upon his/her individual object study to the catalogue. The catalogue essay should provide both a case study of the object and a broader historical narrative that addresses the circulation of related objects. As you would for a museum catalogue, you will be asked to collaborate with each other to select “exhibition” objects and to compose the front matter (Title, Table of Contents, Introduction, Acknowledgements) and the back matter (Bibliography, Index). Formatting should be consistent with that of a museum catalogue. Class time will be allotted to work on the catalogue. Your grade for this project will be an average of: 1) the individual essay and 2) the group catalogue.

Individual essay due on Friday, May 2nd, by 5pm. (8-10 pages; formatting requirements: double-spaced, 12 pt. font, one-inch margins)

Catalogue due on Tuesday, May 13th, by 4pm.

Museum Trip(s) As this course deals extensively with artifacts, we will be making at least one class trip to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The trip is required for all students in the class. Ideally, you will use the museum as a resource while you conduct research for both the object study and the final project.

Policy on Extensions Extensions will be granted in the case of medical emergency (upon submission of written proof) or formal notification by a class dean. Late assignments will be penalized by the deduction of one-half of a letter grade per day.

Disability Accommodations If you believe that you need accommodations for a disability, please contact Leslie Hempling in the Office of Student Disability Services (Parrish 113) or email lhempli1@swarthmore.edu to arrange an appointment to discuss your needs. Since accommodations require early planning and are not retroactive, please contact her as soon as possible. For details about the accommodations process, visit the Student Disability Service website at: http://www.swarthmore.edu/student-life/academic-advising-and-support/student-disability-service.xml. You are also welcome to contact me privately to discuss your academic needs. However, all disability-related accommodations must be arranged through Leslie Hempling in the Office of Student Disability Services.

IV. Course Texts

Sven Hedin. My Life as an Explorer (London, 1926).


Readings not cited above will be available for download from the course’s Moodle site.
V. Topics and Schedule

January 21  **Introduction.** Overview of class requirements, readings and schedule; brief presentation on the timeline, geography, and the modern discovery of the Silk Roads

January 28  **Theorizing Portability.** Introduction to the methodology.

Readings


February 4  **Horse, Camel, and Wheel.** Origins of the land routes; nomads; the significance of the horse and camel

Readings


Hedin, pp. 24-64.

February 11  **The Trail of Gold and Silver.** Sassanian coins; gold and silverware; transporting shared motifs

Readings


February 18  **Glazed Wares.** Ceramics

Readings


Regina Krahl, “Reflections of Roman Glass in Chinese Ceramics,” *Journal of Inner*
February 25  **Perfecting Glass.** History of glassmaking; introduction of glass-blowing

**Readings**


Hedin, pp. 154-205.

March 4  **Precious Ornaments.** Jade; pearls; and beads

**Readings**


Hedin, pp. 206-246.

**Object study due by 5pm.**

**SPRING BREAK**

March 18  **The Riding Coat.** The ubiquitous caftan

**Readings**


March 25  **Chain Mail.** Armor and weapons  
**Readings**
Hedin, pp. 325-367.

April 1  **Winds and Strings.** Circulation of instruments and sound  
**Readings**
Mitchell Clark, *Sounds of the Silk Road: Musical Instruments of Asia* (Boston: MFA, 2005), pp. 8-19 (Introduction), pp. 20-69 (East Asia), and pp. 101-149 (South, Central, and West Asia).
Hedin, pp. 368-405.

April 8  **The Paper Roads.** Spread of papermaking technology; the uses of paper  
**Readings**
Hedin, pp. 406-448.

April 15  **The Trade in Relics.** Consuming Buddhism in the imperial court.
**Readings**
Hedin, pp. 449-488.
April 22  **Cherishing Silk From Afar.** Trade in silk; innovations in silk weaving; the transmission of motifs and technologies

**Readings**


Hedin, pp. 489-525 (end).

April 29  **Final Reflections.** Thinking about why stuff matters.

**Reading**