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Exhibit Review: “Traveling the Silk Road” at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles

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The Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County temporary exhibit, “Traveling the Silk Road” serves as a great introduction to the long, convoluted history of the Silk Roads. This exhibit takes the audience on a journey along the land routes that connected the Eurasian landmass, beginning in Xi’an (known also as Chang’an), and stopping in the major cities of Turfan, Baghdad, and Samarkand. The exhibit shows what sorts of goods were traded as well as snippets of the cultures of the people who lived in the areas traversed. For the public, this exhibit offered a general base of information on the Silk Roads, however, the overall exhibit lacked depth and substance.

The museum does an excellent job of introducing the Silk Roads to guests who are not well versed on the subject. A focus on four main cities is less overwhelming for the general public than if they would have examined every important city in the long history of the Silk Roads. At the start of the exhibit, the visitor is given a “passport” to stamp at each location, giving the illusion of going on a journey. That aspect, along with other interactive features, makes the exhibit appealing, especially for children. The life-size models of camels and a Tang-era silk loom add a sense of immersion to the Silk Roads. The exhibit cleverly engages the senses. Guests can watch animated videos of Chinese folk tales, feel a rough sample of papyrus, smell different jars of spices and scents that were popular on the Silk Roads, observe silk worms behind a glass, manipulate an astrolabe to calculate the altitude of stars, explore an informative map on a large touch screen, and listen to various musical instruments used in Xi’an with the touch of a button.



Figure 1: An interactive electronic tabletop map in the Samarkand section of the exhibition invites visitors to discover the links among cultures, technology, and geography along the Silk Road. By pressing different buttons, new information is projected across the map, revealing surprising connections. © AMNH/D. Finnin

At the last room of the exhibit, there are large displays of what the four featured locations look like today. This makes the Silk Roads relatable to the modern era because it shows how much those cities have both changed and remained the same. At the very end of the exhibit, a large screen with a quiz game encourages the guests to test their knowledge by answering questions that pertain to the exhibit. This interactive game appealed to a wide range of audiences from the elderly to the very young. Few museums are able to keep such diverse crowds entertained without compromising the educational material, and while this exhibit could have done a better job by including more educational stations, the fact that they were able to balance these aspects well is worthy of merit.

Specific displays of the exhibit were interesting, including Baghdad's advanced glass making section. It engaged audiences and allowed us to get a different feel for all of the kinds of glass that were made in that time period and highly valued along the Silk Roads. This provided the audience insight into a culture vastly different from our own, as well as historical context into what was valuable during that place and time. The exhibit design was stellar in most aspects; it was accessible, and easily navigable. The displays were well lit and they were spread out well enough so that the exhibit could avoid most congestion.

One benefit of the exhibit was the concise narrative it followed. It kept the audience following the flow of the museum, without feeling constrained by it.



Figure 2: Turfan Night Market. The lush Turfan section of the exhibition transports visitors to a re-created night market in this desert city overflowing with all the goods—sapphires, silks, jades and rubies, leopard furs and peacock feathers, and fruits and spices—that would have captivated travelers over a thousand years ago. © AMNH.

Afterwards, just like any good museum, there was a conveniently located gift shop with Silk Roads-themed merchandise and books that invite the reader to dive into a deeper world than the limits of the exhibit. This museum exhibit served as a good introduction to the Silk Roads, which may encourage others to expand their newly found knowledge in the future. The exhibit is not without its flaws, however. Problems did not lie in the design, but in the subject matter and the excessive simplicity of what was sometimes being conveyed to the audience. There is nothing wrong with simplicity--every permanent exhibit in the museum was simple in its design--however, this was a special exhibit. As an exhibit where one travels along a set path, and with an added cost to the regular admission, it is reasonable to expect a far more in-depth exploration of the subject matter than what was on display at the museum.

One of the expectations that fell short was that the exhibit stopped at Baghdad. The curators did not show how trade impacted the Roman and Byzantine Empires and their sumptuary laws, for example, which strictly regulated who could buy and sell silks, as well as other luxury goods. From material goods to intellectual advancements, these empires were affected tremendously by the trade with the Silk Road, yet the exhibit neglected this aspect of the history. There is a small section on the maritime trade routes in the last room, which makes it seem as if the maritime trade was not as important as the trade in the four cities. This is misleading, since the “Maritime Silk Roads” were vastly important to the movement of goods and ideas. Another issue with the exhibit content was that it understated the peoples and cultures of the oasis towns in between the major cities. Most of the merchants traveling along the Silk Roads did not travel more than the 100 plus miles in any direction and only went a certain distance outside their villages or cities to trade their wares to other merchants and return home—for the most part, it was nothing as grand as the travels of Marco Polo. The exhibit, however, did not touch upon this important subject at all.

Another section relegated to the end of the exhibit was the interactive touch-screen table with sections for the different cultures, motifs, and styles of handicrafts they produced. Also included on the table was a small section on religion. This section could have had its own room because religion played a role as large as actual trading along the Silk Roads. When merchants traded, they were not only trading goods, but were exchanging ideas, cultures, and religions. There could have been better efforts in developing this important idea.



Figure 3: Chinese Buddha. This marble Buddha statue (AD 680) is Chinese, but the artist was clearly influenced by both Chinese and Indian traditions. The figure is dressed in loose-fitting Indian garments, but with a Chinese twist: instead of allowing the clothing to reveal much of the body, the usual practice in Indian depictions of Buddha, the Chinese artist focused more on the drapery itself, common in Chinese art. From the Metropolitan Museum of Art © AMNH/D. Finnin.

All things considered however, “Traveling the Silk Road” is a worthwhile and impressive exhibit. A more in-depth treatment of the history of the Silk Roads would have been more satisfying, especially considering the fact that this is a special temporary exhibit. It is well designed and accessible to everybody, and provided an enjoyable sensory experience; along with some basic knowledge on the Silk Roads and the places it passed through.

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