chapter four

Precious Goods to Buy

Metal and Clay

▼ *Graeco-Bactrian silver coin of c.220-190 BCE. It carries the portrait of King Euthymedes. The Greek influence can be seen in the lines of the hair and the facial features.*

► *Small Chinese drinking cup made between 730-35 during the Tang Dynasty It is made in silver and gilt and the motifs it features, in particular the huntsman, show the influence of Sasanian metalwork.*

The expansion of great empires or religious conversion could bring about swift and often spectacular changes in a people's culture, which would be reflected in distinct developments in art styles. In large-scale art, trading connections alone were unlikely to cause such revolutions. However, the trade along the Silk and Spice Routes was responsible for a constant and very influential exchange of ideas, namely those expressed in the trade items themselves.

One small but vital item of trade that reflects these two processes is the coin. The Greek rulers that Alexander left behind in Bactria formed an independent kingdom from 250 to 139 BCE. They had a series of coins minted in the new Greek style, displaying exquisitely executed royal portraits on one side and Greek deities on the other. As these coins were distributed through Central Asia, they inspired the minting of similarly styled coins in neighbouring kingdoms and those of later rulers. These were imbued with elements of their own culture:

local gods were substituted for Greek ones and the portrait style adjusted along the lines of their own traditions of figurative art.

The trade in precious metals did not just involve coins. The metalsmiths along the Silk and Spice Routes' paths produced dishes, bowls and goblets to be sold in their markets. From the Fourth to Eighth Centuries CE, the metalwork of Sasanian Iran was particularly prized. The designs and motifs it featured were extensively copied by the metalsmiths of China's Tang Dynasty.

Under the Tang, China was wide open to new ideas and much of the craft work of this period reveals the impact of Sasanian exports. The western habit of wine-drinking became popular and the shape of ceramic wine ewers and bottles reflected its foreign origins. However, the glazes and techniques of producing these vessels were uniquely Chinese and these, in turn, had a major impact on the West for it was during the Tang period that Chinese ceramics began to reach Western Asia in large quantities. Particularly admired was porcelain, hard but so delicate it was almost possible to see through. This fine 'china' was even named in the West by its country of origin.

Porcelain was first produced in China in the Eighth Century CE but it was nearly nine hundred years before people in the West learnt how to make it themselves. This did not stop them trying to imitate it, firstly in Western Asia and later in Europe as well. The mimics used similar coloured glazes over poorer quality clay and their products were extremely popular, although the much more expensive Chinese porcelain was still the ultimate in luxury. The blue and white glazes on porcelain, first used by the Mongol Yuan Dynasty, inspired many European adaptations, most notably the Seventeenth Century Delft ware from Holland. Even today, the famous blue and white willow pattern is still a popular design in Europe on cups, saucers and plates.

▼ *Mid-19th Century plate made at Worcester, England The blue and white willow pattern is a direct descendant of earlier Chinese designs.*

▼ *This 15th Century Islamic scroll fragment is thought to show a Chinese trade or diplomatic mission to Central Asia. Significantly, among the goods they carry is the highly-prized blue and white porcelain.*

Weaving Cloth and Carpets

▲ Fragment of Chinese silk from the Tang Dynasty period. The design of a deer in profile encircled by pearls copies that of earlier Sasanian silk designs.

The other greatly prized Chinese product to be exported along the trade routes was, of course, silk. In the early centuries of the Silk and Spice Routes' history, China was simply known in the West as the land of 'Seres', that is, silk, and the luxurious material became associated with the highest of fashions and the richest of courts. In China, too, the best quality silken cloth was reserved for the royal family and its weavers enjoyed a status as high as any painter or sculptor.

► The Byzantine silk fragment found in the tomb of the Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne. It was woven during the 7th Century at the far western end of the Silk Route, at much the same time as the Chinese silk above. Although produced thousands of kilometres apart, both share the same design idea of an image encircled by a border that originated from Sasanian silk.

Production of both silk twine and cloth was at first exclusively in the hands of the Chinese (even today the Far East is still the main producer of silk). However, around 300 CE, silk twine produced in China was being woven into cloth across Asia, as far west as Roman Syria. The most influential silk-weaving industry was established by the Sasanian monarch Shapur II (310-379) in cities such as Susa, using the expertise of weavers seized during his invasion of Syria.

Sasanian silks were exported both east and west and their designs, themselves inspired by earlier Indian and Chinese work, incorporated into the patterns of the local textiles. Like the Tang metalsmiths, Chinese weavers borrowed Sasanian motifs as did the Byzantine weavers of Constantinople and Antioch. There were two main types of pattern, one based on hunting or battle scenes, the other composed of a series of circles each enclosing single birds or animals. The Byzantine silk fragment found in the tomb of the Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne (742-814) combines both designs.

The Byzántine textile industry led to the spread of silk weaving even further west. In the Twelfth Century, Roger II of Sicily brought silk-weavers from Constantinople to his capital at Palermo. This marks the birth of the Italian silk industry which still exists today. During the period of *Pax Mongolica,* when Chinese silks were widely available in Italy, the Italian designs were injected with more eastern influences. The patterns became much more fluid, bigger and bolder, with fewer heraldic animals in the Sasanian style and scrolling leaf and flower forms were taken from the Chinese designs.

▲ *Iranian carpet, 17-18th Century. It shows the layout of an Islamic garden design known as the chahar bagh. Trees surrounded by channels of running water provided coolness and shade from the blazing heat. Asian carpet weavers found inspiration for their designs from many different sources.*

◀ *A carpet salesman on a street corner in Abu Dhabi, capital of the United Arab Emirates.*

Silk was not the only textile industry to grow up along the trade routes. Carpet weaving was, and still is, of particular importance to many of the peoples of Central and West Asia. Carpets rich in intricate detail adorn the floors of both the homes and mosques of these regions and a great mixture of influences can be seen at work. Islamic, Sasanian, Chinese and Indian aspects may be detected but in conjunction with strong local traditions, as each village and town developed designs that can be identified as uniquely their own. The earliest known carpet, discovered in the tomb of a Scythian nomad in the Altai region of Siberia, dates from about 500 BCE. It displays a mixture of Persian and Scythian influences, suggesting that, even then, the process of cultural exchange through trade was well established.

Shaping the Fashion

▲ *Pushtooni tribesman dancing at a festival in Afghanistan. The belted kaftan tunics worn with baggy trousers are characteristic of the region. Variations on this style of clothing can be found right across Asia.*

► *6th Century mosaic from the church of San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy It shows the Empress Theodora (508-548) in a religious procession The sumptuous clothes and jewellery of the Byzantine court can be clearly seen*

▼ *The elaborate winter headdress worn by Kalash Kafir girls of the Birir Valley in Northern Pakistan.*

The silk and other fine fabrics, the jewels and the gold that became available as a result of trade along the Silk and Spice Routes had a tremendous impact on the clothes and jewellery people wore. The richness and variety of the materials and fashions worn are preserved in careful detail by the artists who created the sculptures, mosaics and paintings found in so many of the trading cities. The portraits carved during the Second Century CE at Palmyra show the elaborate hairstyles and jewellery a rich citizen could wear, as do the later Fifth Century murals found in the Sogdian cities of Central Asia. Clothes and jewellery, like so many aspects of daily life, could express so much of a community's feelings about themselves – from pride in its local traditions to a desire for the extravagant and the new.

For the vast majority of people, though, clothes were first and foremost practical, none more so than the simple kaftan – a long, straight tunic that could be adapted to suit almost any lifestyle. Worn belted over trousers it was ideal for horseriding and was worn in this manner from the earliest times by the nomadic people of the Eurasian

Steppe. During the Sixth Century BCE, this style was adopted by the Chinese as they too began to ride horses, partly so that they could fight with the nomads on equal terms. The movement of the various nomadic tribes meant that, with modifications, the kaftan developed as a useful article of clothing right across Asia including India.

The loose-fitting draped Greek and Roman style of clothes also had its impact on the trade route fashions, as reflected in Buddhist art (see page 18). However, as the Roman Empire evolved into the Byzantine Empire, with its focus around the Balkans and the Middle East, so more eastern fashions filtered through to Europe. Rich fabrics and jewels poured into the Byzantine capital of Constantinople and these were combined to form dazzling costumes that were copied far and wide. The Byzantine courtiers found the beautiful cloth, influenced by Sasanian designs, was better displayed by the straight line of the kaftan rather than the folds of the toga. This style was also more dignified, which suited the image the courtiers wished to project, as did the increasingly lavish use of jewellery. In the Eighth Century, the power of the Byzantine Empire began to wane, but the costumes of its court became ever more extravagant, still proclaiming them as the great empire that in reality their armies could no longer sustain.

◀ *Sogdian mural from Penjikent, near Samarkand. The artist has given careful attention to the women's jewellery and hairstyles.*

▲ *Limestone bust of 2nd Century CE from Palmyra. It shows a noblewoman heavily adorned with jewellery in a fashion that reflects both the city's wealth and the mixture of eastern and Roman influences it was open to.*

A Taste for the Exotic

▲ *An illustration from an Italian manuscript of c. 1385. It shows two women making pasta, the one on the right preparing the mixture while the other pulls it out into long threads. Italian pasta probably developed from the Chinese noodle.*

One of the most lasting effects of the trade between East and West is the evolution in peoples' diets, a process which continues today. The spices, which give the sea routes their name, added many new and different flavours to homegrown cuisines from China through to Europe. Black pepper, for example, came almost exclusively from southern India until the Eighteenth Century, yet it was used for flavouring the length and breadth of the trade routes from before the start of the Common Era. More staple components of people's diet evolved as a result of trade – rice and pasta were both introduced to the Middle East and Europe in this way. Legend has it that pasta was brought back to Italy in 1295 by Marco Polo but in reality it was known long before this. However, its origins probably do stem from the Chinese noodle.

► *Two geisha women preparing the tea for a formal tea drinking ceremony in Japan.*

◀ *An engraving from a Dutch book of 1667. This is one of the earliest European representations of the tea plant and the picking and drinking of tea.*

▲ *Tang Chinese pottery wine ewer of the late 7th or early 8th Century. It follows western designs reflecting the origins of the grape wine which became a fashionable drink in Tang China.*

A taste for exotic foods was not always easy to fulfil, availability was limited and prices high. The diet of the nomadic peoples of the Silk Route was mainly a simple one, consisting mostly of meat from their animals. Even their alcohol was made from *kumis*, the fermented milk of their precious horses. Similarly in China, although the western taste for wine made from grapes became fashionable during the Tang period, it never began to replace the local rice and sorgum wines.

For many cultures eating and drinking have ceremonial associations: a special occasion such as a religious festival is celebrated by a feast and the rules of hospitality mean that a visitor is greeted with the offer of drink and food. In Japan, a formal ceremony of greeting called *chanoyu* has evolved around drinking tea. Tea was introduced there in the Eighth Century CE by Buddhist monks and this religious aspect no doubt added to the significance of drinking it. Soon, it became popular in the Japanese court, where the qualities of different teas were discussed and poems even written on their virtues.

Tea drinking has produced many different customs in the countries that adopted it. Originally tea grew wild in northeast India but, at an early stage, it was introduced to other parts of East Asia. It was certainly being drunk and probably grown in China by the start of the Han Dynasty in 206 BCE. From China, tea was exported to Tibet. Here, it was drunk with salt and butter, and bricks of tea were even used as a form of currency. In the deserts of the Middle East, where tea was probably introduced by the Mongols, it was brewed with mint, making a refreshing drink in the searing heat.

The expansion of Western European trade, particularly by the Dutch and English, in the Seventeenth Century, helped promote tea drinking there as well. As an expensive foreign import, it was at first only fashionable with the very rich, and elaborate silver or porcelain tea caddies and teapots were made as a result. Today, in Britain at least, it has become for many an essential part of everyday life!