INNOVATIONS
HUMANITY TRANSFORMED
2013-2014 SERIES
The Archaeological Institute of America, Houston Society
Weaving the World Together: Trade Along the Silk Routes
Dr. Angela Sheng
Associate Professor, Art History
McMaster University
Sunday, April 6, 2014
2:00 p.m.
Brown Auditorium Theater
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Cosponsored by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
About the Houston Society of the Archaeological Institute of America

“In Retracing the history of man fascinates me, as though some clue to our existence could thus be found.” Domintique de Menil

In 1967, Dominique de Menil had a vision of what could exist in Houston, Texas by helping to create an organization that, through the lens of archaeology, promotes cultural literacy and understanding. She, along with Philip Oliver Smith and Walter Widrig, founded the Houston Society of the Archaeological Institute of America to help Houstonians better understand their past, and through that understanding, arrive at a deeper knowledge of the world around them.

OUR 2013-2014 SERIES

“Innovations: Humanity Transformed.”

Since humans became human, we have changed our world through our innovations, finding new sources of energy, new places to live, new ways to feed ourselves, new ways of expressing ourselves, and new ways of improving our health. This is a talent whose effects we have only begun to grasp.

Imagine how different our lives would be without these innovations.

Our Next Event

ARE WE THERE YET? AFRICAN ORIGINS AND THE HUMAN JOURNEY

John Kappelman, Professor of Anthropology, University of Texas
Tuesday, May 13, 2014, 6:30 pm
Large Screen Theater
Houston Museum of Natural Science

DIG INTO SCIENCE
5:30 pm
Prelecture tour of hominid section in the Paleontology Hall.

LEARN MORE!
PLEASE CONSULT THESE WEBSITES OR BOOKS

Life Along the Silk Road by Susan Whitfield. University of California Press; Second edition (October 29, 2007)

When Silk was Gold: Central Asian and Chinese Textiles by James C. Y. Watt, Anne E. Wardwell. Metropolitan Museum of Arts (September 10, 2013) Catalog for exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum showcasing silk textiles

The Silk Road in World History (New Oxford World History) by Xinru Liu. Ten Speed Press; Revised edition (November 24, 2009)

The Silk Road, A New History by Valarie Hansen. Oxford University Press (August 14, 2012)

http://natgeotv.com/uk/lost-in-china/videos/silk-road Preview of video about China and the Silk Road
How did this modest artery become the world’s most famous cultural superhighway?

The Silk Routes. The very name is redolent with romance and mystery. The term was coined in 1887 by Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen to describe the series of overland trade routes between China and Central Asia. Initially, the term conjured up images of explorers who rushed to the Taklamakan Desert to excavate in the sands. Today, we have stretched the term’s time span back into antiquity. If anything, the term has come to acquire an even more mysterious aura. The more we come to know an extremely complex history of cross-cultural relations among peoples with different languages, governments, beliefs, customs, technologies, artistic expressions, and material life, the more nuanced our understanding of life along these fabled routes becomes and the more questions spring to mind.

Our understanding continues to grow as more discoveries come to light. Documents and textiles excavated along the Silk Routes allow us to see with needle-sharp precision who was moving along these trade routes and why. Merchants, envoys, refugees, missionaries, artists, and craftsmen all helped transmit the many ideas the moved across Eurasia in the first millennium CE.

Millenniums ago the world was changed by the simple act of the first person to hand an object to another in exchange for a coveted good. Through time, the human innovation of trade stimulated cultural exchange and continues to be an impetus for many more exchanges.

Who knew that the work of the worm that created a lustrous, delicate, yet strong, long-lasting fabric would be the impetus for cultural exchange that changed the world.

Image: Bodhisattva painting on silk, Khocha, 9th to 10th century CE
PROFILE OF ANGELA SHENG

Textile scholar Dr. Angela Sheng, one of the foremost scholars on silk, received her Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania in Oriental Studies and acquired technical training in the textile arts from RISD, the Centre d’Etudes des Textiles Anciens in Lyon, and Skolen for Brugskunst in Copenhagen. She served as Assistant Curator of Asian Textiles at the Royal Ontario Museum. Currently, she is an Associate Professor of Art History at McMaster University.

Angela Sheng has lectured widely and authored numerous publications about silk, the technology of its production, and the history of the Silk Route, some in conjunctions with exhibits on the Silk Road. The subjects range from textiles as money, textiles symbolic of women’s virtue, textiles as agency for technological change and so forth. She also edited *Writing with Threads: Traditional Textiles of Southwest Chinese Minorities* (2009), accompanying the exhibition of 300 choice samples from the world-renowned collection at the Evergrand Museum in Taiwan. The exhibit traveled from the University of Hawai’i Art Gallery to the Chase Art Museum at University of Wisconsin at Madison and the International Folk Art Museum in Santa Fe (2008-2009). She is currently working on *Reading Textiles: a new view of Silk Road Exchanges* that will show readers how to read textiles as documents while revealing the hitherto hidden impact of the mobile nomads on art, religion, and technology in the first millennium across Inner Asia from the eastern shores of the Mediterranean to China and beyond.

Dr. Sheng strongly believes in the importance of academic interaction with the public. She has served since 2005 on the board of the Canadian Foundation for Chinese Heritage Preservation where she has undertaken a number of community outreach projects. She was invited to be part of the popular PBS television show “History Detectives” where she helped solve a mystery about the origins of an elaborately embroidered smoking jacket dating back to the late 1930s.

Images from the trenches

Fifth-grade students learn about the domestication of the horse and its importance in the life of the Bedouin.

THE CARLTON SPEED FAMILY FOUNDATION
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Homeless children, students in gifted and talented programs, honors students at the University of Houston, students of engineering at a high school magnet program, families and children in the community...all have benefitted from our educational outreach. Your support of the Houston Society of the Archaeological Institute of America has far-reaching implications beyond our lecture series. Our intensive educational and community outreach continues to grow by the year. A generous gift from the Carlton Speed Family Foundation has been instrumental in creating a greater understanding of past history and its impact on today’s events, and in celebrating the diversity of Houston. This coming year our goal is to reach 6,000 students through our events.

Our credo: Everyone’s history matters; the multidisciplinary field of archaeology is essential in order to build a more inclusive story of the human past; archaeological sites hold the stories of the past and must be preserved for the future; archaeology promotes respect for culture, the environment, and other people.

Images from the trenches

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AS WE SEEK TO SOLVE THE PROBLEMS WE FACE TODAY, ARCHAEOLOGY HOLDS KEYS TO HELP US UNLOCK THE FUTURE, AND THROUGH THE CREATION OF UNDERSTANDING, HELPS US VALUE THE BASIC DIGNITY OF ALL HUMANKIND.

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1575 West Grand Pkwy S, Katy, TX
Q: What led to your becoming a specialist in silk? Did you have an early interest in fabrics that you later developed into a career or did your interest arise by other means?

Angela Sheng: A convergence of several factors: As a child, I raised silkworms for fun and found the whole process absolutely fascinating. In grade nine I studied Greek mythology in the English class and was mesmerized by mythology and symbols. But, my parents preferred I study mathematics and sciences rather than art history at the university. However, eventually my interest in the world of French fashion led me to volunteer for a wonderful costumes curator, Jackie B. Ross, at the McCord Museum in Montreal. At the time I was also assisting a cinéaste at the National Film Board, Georges Dufaux, editing his documentary trilogy on China, *Sur la voie*. He asked many questions about China that I found difficult to answer. So, I thought I should go back to school and study Chinese history. But, I wanted to do it in a way that combined my interest in symbolism and fashion. And the only person who had published seriously on the history of Chinese costumes in the west was the late Schuyler Cammann at the University of Pennsylvania, so I went there to meet him. That’s how it started.

Q: We read about your stint on the popular PBS series “History Detectives”! Tell us more!

Angela Sheng: That was so much fun! Organizers of the program contacted me about a black velvet man’s smoking jacket that had various embroideries on it, including the initials of M.W.D. They wanted to know if I could help them decode the motifs and sent me some photographs. I did. Then, they tracked down the son of the original owner of the jacket. It belonged to Michael Walter Dowham of the 4th Marines, stationed in Shanghai to protect American business interest there from 1937 to 1939. He promoted a Chinese employee, probably a translator. The latter had his wife make a smoking jacket as a parting gift. The most significant information was the date: 1937. August that year fighting broke out between the Chinese and the Japanese, escalating to war. The Americans had always claimed neutrality but in fact they were at the scene of war, as revealed by this jacket with the embroidered date. Here we had material evidence to the contrary of edited textual history. I really enjoyed the way Gwen Wright, an architectural historian at Columbia University, and I discussed the whole situation that had pluralistic truths.

Q: How does research about ancient clothing and fabrics help us understand their world. How does your research relate to clothing and fabrics of modern life? What correspondences can you draw? How does this knowledge help us understand more about humans?

Angela Sheng: These are big questions. In a nutshell, as demonstrated by the smoking jacket, material evidence can provide more information not contained in textual evidence as historical tracts. Also, not everyone in the past left texts, but almost everyone left some kind of material evidence, like burial clothing that can reveal many things to us such as gender, ethnicity, social status, not to mention art, technology and belief systems. However, one must know how to read textiles. This is the subject of the book that I am currently racing to finish.

Q: If you were to assemble a dinner-party of people from the past, whom would you invite?

Angela Sheng: That should be exciting! Let’s see, Lady Dai who died in 168 BCE and was buried with amazing silks in a permanent underground home the design of which was painted on her name banner covering her coffin; the Japanese Princess Tachibana no Oiratsume who commissioned an embroidery to commemorate her husband Prince Shōtoku who died in 622 - you can read about both in my article “From Stone to Silk” available on my webpage; the one man and six women, all nomadic pre-Kushan elite buried with over 20,000 gold ornaments at Tillya Tepe near modern Shebergan of Afghanistan in the early first century—they feature in my current book project; Song Yingxing, a minor literati-official who wrote a curious entry about the velvet from Zhangzhou in his *Craft of 10,000 Things* published in 1637, about which I am writing in another publication... I guess you might say anyone who might help resolve my multitude of research puzzles!

Q: If you had the chance, would you have liked to be a trader along the Silk Route? What would have been the most interesting thing for you along the Route?

Angela Sheng: That would depend on the definition of a trader. I will reveal that in my talk. The most interesting thing for me would have been to learn how people beautified themselves and their lives.