THE SILK ROAD ONLINE

Little was known of the Silk Road until archaeologists uncovered ancient cities in the desert sands, revealing astonishing sculptures, murals and manuscripts. The Buddhist cave library near Dunhuang in western China was one such remarkable discovery. Sealed around AD 1000 and only re-discovered in 1900 it contained over forty thousand manuscripts and paintings. Other sites have yielded tens of thousands more artefacts. These unique items have fascinating stories to tell of life on this ancient trade route. Most, however, were dispersed in the early 1900s to institutions worldwide.

The International Dunhuang Project (IDP) was formed in 1994 by the major holding institutions with the vision of reuniting these artefacts through digital photography, using web technologies to make them freely accessible to all and coordinating international teams to ensure their preservation and cataloguing. IDP has an immense task ahead but it has started to give a voice to the people who once lived in these ancient cities, worshipped in the cave temples and traded in the markets.

Hundreds of thousands of images of manuscripts, paintings, textiles and artefacts along with catalogues, translations, historical and modern photographs, explorers’ archives and more are already freely available on IDP’s multilingual website and are widely used by scholars, schoolchildren and others. But there is still much to do.

YOUR DONATION IS VITAL

IDP is dependent on external funding. Our work so far has been enabled by the generous and loyal support of individuals, foundations and funding bodies worldwide. Your help is essential. You can donate directly online through our website or if you wish to discuss support of a major project please contact us.
With collaborating institutions in Europe, Asia and America, IDP has numerous ongoing collaborative projects involving conservation, cataloguing, digitisation, research and education. Below are examples of major projects in each area. To learn more about IDP’s activities go online or sign up to receive *IDP News*.

**CONSERVATION, DIGITISATION AND CATALOGUING**

These are core activities for all IDP partners, ensuring the preservation of the collections for future generations and online access for the current generation. This is specialist work as the collections are often fragile and conservation and digitisation requires time and care to do well. But with over 50% of the historic collections digitised and with trained staff working worldwide, we have already made great progress.

Conserving and digitising the Buddhist material from Dunhuang — mainly Chinese scrolls and Tibetan pothi — is one of the largest projects, but 60% is now done. Just as the original manuscripts were commissioned by patrons who added a dedication at the end, today we have the ‘Sponsor a Sutra’ scheme to fund digitisation where the dedication is added online next to the digital image.

**RESEARCH**

The first millennium was a period of unprecedented technological innovation along the Eurasian Silk Road which saw the first mass-production of paper, the appearance of book forms such as the codex, the development of print technology, the spread of silk production, experimentation with inks and pigments, and breakthroughs in weaving and dyeing techniques. The innovation and transmission of these technologies offers a fascinating case study of transnational and multiethnic networks. As one of its major research projects, IDP is coordinating conservators, curators, scientists and scholars to collate data and to develop methods for tracing the innovation and transmission of technologies in writing, papermaking, printing, weaving and dyeing.

**EDUCATION AND OUTREACH**

IDP has always been committed to reach and inspire new audiences through educational resources and activities for all levels, from schoolchildren to lifelong learners. We have worked with schoolchildren and teachers in many countries and our downloadable educational resource packs cover topics such as Buddhism and astronomy. IDP holds regular events to engage with existing and new audiences, including conferences, public lectures and workshops. IDP staff also teach regular classes at different venues and speak at events worldwide.

For more information visit our website (http://idp.bl.uk) and sign up to our free mailing list or become a Silk Road Supporter to receive regular updates and invitations to IDP events.