In 756, Empress Kömyō donated the prized possessions of her husband, the recently deceased Emperor Shōmu, to the Buddhist monastery of Tōdai-ji. Unbeknownst to the Empress, her donation would become the basis of a modern museum collection. And not just of any museum, but a repository of artifacts that were produced and exchanged along the trade routes across Eurasia that are now known collectively as the Silk Road. The Shōsō-in, where this collection is housed, is according to one recent account, the “final destination” of the Silk Road. This course is an introduction to the arts of the Silk Road through its final destination.

Each week, we will begin with the close study of one artifact from the repository of the Shōsō-in, examining the object’s basic design, material, original context of use or display, and speculating on how it might have entered the collection; this key artifact will then serve as our point of entry into a much larger picture, of the peoples, religions, and material cultures along the trade routes. At the same time, the Shōsō-in also presents itself as a unique case study of an art collection outside the early modern European context. We will consider not only the Shōsō-in’s past, but also its future, as we explore how the collection evolves over time, and continues to play an important role in the visual culture of Japan from the eighth-century to the present day.