



For Immediate Release

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Silkroad Announces Silkroad Connect, an Education and Social Impact-Focused Initiative

The year-long program will launch in four middle schools across the country this fall, centering the arts as an integral tool to support students' academic and social learning

Boston, MA — [Silkroad](#) announced today the launch of **Silkroad Connect**, a partnership between Silkroad, the Kennedy Center's [Turnaround Arts](#) program, and under-resourced middle-school classrooms across the country, that uses the arts to support students' social, emotional and academic learning needs through an equity lens. The program is inspired by Silkroad's new artistic endeavor, ***The American Railroad***, which is a multi-year multimedia concert, educational, and commissioning series that will dive deeply into the untold history, cultures, and music of the Transcontinental Railroad and the silenced communities who helped to build it.

"Our art is our history. One way or another, we are all deeply rooted in the cultures, musics, and traditions of those who came before us," said Silkroad's Artistic Director Rhiannon Giddens. "Silkroad Connect will shine a light on the overlooked and give students the agency to reimagine their place in history."

Silkroad Connect will explore the stories, cultures, and music of the African American, Chinese, Irish, and Native American communities who helped to build the Transcontinental Railroad. These and other immigrant populations played a massive role in one of the most important technological and economic achievements of the 19th century, yet their contributions have been erased from history. Through professional development in inquiry-based and culturally responsive pedagogy, artist visits, and a brand-new curriculum, Silkroad Connect will model for students how music and storytelling can serve as a tool to confront erasure, invite healing, retell historical untruths, and amplify the voices and contributions of marginalized communities.

"Turnaround Arts is deeply committed to culturally responsive arts education. Our partnership with Silkroad embodies this ethos," stated Turnaround Arts' National Director Holly Bass. We recognize that American history is created from many stories and threads. Through exploring the history of the Transcontinental Railroad, we can authentically and creatively learn about the lived experiences and rich cultural contributions of Indigenous Americans, Black Americans,

Asian Americans, and others; histories that have been minimized or left out of school textbooks altogether.”

The four schools participating in the pilot phase of Silkroad Connect are: **North Monterey County Middle School** in Monterey, CA; **John C. Fremont Elementary School** in Stockton, CA; **Orchard Gardens Pilot School** in Boston, MA; and **Parkway Middle School** in Broward County, FL. These schools were selected through an application process open to Turnaround Arts-affiliated schools.

Participating teachers will begin the school year by engaging in professional development on inquiry-based and culturally responsive pedagogy. This training will help teachers cultivate a classroom culture of belonging and safety, while also equipping them with tools and strategies to lead authentic conversations about social justice. Teachers will guide discussions on identity, community, and the cultures of those who built the Transcontinental Railroad through a newly-designed, 12-lesson curriculum. Members of the [Silkroad Ensemble](#)—including Kinan Azmeh, Sandeep Das, Hadi Eldebek, Mario Gotoh, Karen Ouzounian, Edward Pérez, Shaw Pong Liu, Mazz Swift, and Michi Wiancko—joined by local artists and culture bearers, will make visits to classrooms over the course of the year, engaging in music-making and cultural exchanges that showcase the power of the arts to be used as a tool for social change.

At the end of the school year, Silkroad Connect teachers will be invited to attend the [Arts and Passion-Driven Learning Institute](#), a collaboration between Silkroad and the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The three-day immersive experience engages K-12 educators who come from a variety of educational settings and serve in many different roles within arts and educational programs in professional development. Through workshops, performances, plenaries, panels and small group discussions that center equity and justice, teachers will further build their abilities to implement inquiry-based and culturally responsive instruction that addresses students’ academic, social, emotional and civic learning needs.

“Exploring points in our country’s history through an artistic and equity lens is critical,” stated Silkroad’s Education and Social Impact Director Alicia Robinson. “As an organization founded on and grounded in diversity of thought and inclusivity, Silkroad is committed to using its large platform to highlight and amplify silenced stories, and to create safe spaces where students can find agency and voice through the arts.”

Silkroad Connect first launched in 2009 as an artistic response to research from Johns Hopkins University, which showed a correlation between the high school dropout rate and students’ performance in middle school. Under the guidance of Silkroad founder Yo-Yo Ma, Silkroad Connect 2009 brought artists to New York City public schools for a multi-year, multidisciplinary educational initiative. Though the name remains the same, Silkroad Connect 2021 has evolved to respond to the needs of modern-day classrooms—an urgency to confront historical erasure with student-centered learning through a lens of equity and social justice.

Funding Credits

Support for Silkroad Connect is provided, in part, by a growing list of supporters, including Rosamund Allen in memory of her parents, the Barr Foundation, the Densford Fund of the Riverside Church, the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, and the Hultberg Family in memory of Paul Hultberg. Seed funding generously provided by LaVon Kellner and Tom Roush. Silkroad gratefully acknowledges their generous support of activities that promote innovation, education, and cross-cultural understanding through the arts.

About Silkroad

Yo-Yo Ma conceived Silkroad in 1998, recognizing the historical Silk Road as a model for cultural collaboration—for the exchange of ideas, tradition, and innovation across borders. In a groundbreaking experiment, he brought together musicians from the lands of the Silk Road to co-create a musical language founded in difference, thus creating the foundation of Silkroad: both a touring ensemble comprised of world-class musicians from all over the globe and a social impact organization working to make a positive impact across borders through the arts.

Today, under the leadership of Artistic Director Rhiannon Giddens, Silkroad leads social impact initiatives and educational programming alongside the creation of new music by the Grammy Award-winning Silkroad Ensemble.

To learn more, please visit silkroad.org and @silkroadproject on social media.

About Turnaround Arts

Turnaround Arts is a national program of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. It was founded in 2011 by the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, a White House advisory committee on cultural issues, under the leadership of former First Lady Michelle Obama. The program is based on the premise that high-quality and integrated arts education can strengthen school transformation efforts, boost academic achievement, and increase student engagement in schools facing some of the toughest educational challenges in the country.

The program currently works in 62 schools across the country, in 31 districts and 9 states. As part of Turnaround Arts, schools receive an array of arts education services designed to increase their opportunities for success, engage their community, and raise the visibility of their achievements. Key to these efforts is building arts education programming that is rigorous, effective, and integrated holistically into the school with a focus on equity through the lenses of social emotional learning, culturally responsive pedagogy, and shared leadership.

To learn more, please visit turnaroundarts.kennedy-center.org and @TurnaroundArts on social media.

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