Ancient Bronzes of the Asian Grasslands

Gallery/Study Guide

The Eurasian grasslands, also known as the steppes, cover a region extending from northern China westward through Mongolia to the plains of Eastern Europe. This exhibition focuses on the eastern or Asian steppes whose rolling grassy plains are punctuated by snow-topped mountain ranges like the Tien Shan (Heavenly Mountains), and deserts like the Gobi and the Taklamakan. The eastern steppes were home to a remarkable culture, whose art, richly decorated with animal motifs, is only now beginning to be understood by scholars. The bronze ornaments, weapons, tools and vessels presented in this exhibition, provide a glimpse into the lives of the ancient peoples of the steppes including their work, dress, spiritual beliefs and social structure.

WHO WERE THEY?

Though they belonged to different tribes and clans, and spoke several different languages, the people who lived in the Asian grasslands shared the same manner of living, dress, social organization and spiritual beliefs. They left few written records of their own, so some of our knowledge is based on the accounts of writers who were not part of their culture. Best known are the inhabitants of the western steppes, Scythians, Sauromatians, and related Saka tribes, who were described by the Greek historian Herodotus. The eastern steppe peoples like the Wuhan, Xianbei, and Xiongnu were chronicled by the ancient Chinese historians. However, much of our information comes from archaeological excavations carried out over the last thirty years.

Because the steppe peoples did not share the urban values of the Greeks or the dynastic Chinese, they were considered barbarians. In fact, they had a complex culture that efficiently used the resources around them. They relied primarily on animals, both wild and domestic, to provide food, shelter and clothing, and were so successful in this that they supplied great herds of livestock, particularly horses, to the settled regions of Asia. Their intimate knowledge of the routes across the steppes and mountains, the sources of water, and the seasonal changes in climate were invaluable to the caravans of the Silk Road.

The basic social unit seems to have been the family, then the clan and finally the tribe. Archaeological evidence suggests that high-ranking individuals of different clans and tribes may have intermarried. At one point, Chinese princesses were married to grassland chieftains to secure their allegiance and cooperation.

In the twenty-first century BCE (ca. 2000 BCE), villages of farmers, hunters and fishermen populated the grasslands. By the late fifteenth century (ca. 1400 BCE) many people left their villages to range widely over the steppes, managing herds of sheep, goats, cattle and horses. They sold meat, wool and leather to people living in the cities of Asia, and became increasingly dependent on the settled population for agricultural produce and manufactured goods. Horses, first domesticated in the steppes, were integral to this new way of life. They allowed the herdsmen to range farther for grass, and to manage larger flocks and herds. By the early eighth century (900 BCE) the steppe dwellers, now legendary as riders and breeders, began to supply horses to the empires of eastern and western Asia.

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The steppe peoples were pastoralists who traveled to specific regions in a seasonal cycle to provide grazing land for their livestock. They had no permanent dwellings, living instead in portable, tent-like structures. The modern equivalents of these shelters are Turkic yurts and Mongolian gers. Large cemeteries, discovered during archaeological excavations, probably served as clan or tribal centers.

The famous trade routes linking Asia and Europe in ancient times, such as the Silk Road that connected China and Rome, passed through the grasslands. The steppe peoples guided and supplied the trade caravans that followed these routes, playing an essential role in the transportation of goods and ideas between east and west.

Let's look closely at the examples of art work on display in the gallery.

- Can you identify all of the different categories represented here (for example: tools, personal ornaments, ritual pieces)?
- How do they look alike? How are they different?
- Choose a display case to examine in detail. What do you see?
- Are there any animals represented here? If so, what are they? Why do you think the people of the steppes used so many animals in their art work?
- Are the animals realistic looking, or are some more fanciful?

The steppe dwellers depended upon both the domestic animals that they herded—horses, sheep, goats and camels—and the wild animals they hunted, especially deer, giant argali sheep, mountain goats and ibex. The powerful predators of the nearby mountains—leopards, Siberian tigers, bears and birds of prey—appear in their art. Some animals were probably tribal or clan totems. Their image proclaimed membership in a specific social group.

**ARTS OF THE EASTERN GRASSLANDS**

The steppe dwellers made art objects that were easy to carry, pack or wear because of their mobile lifestyle. They favored bronze for its strength, light weight and resilience, and used it to make tools, weapons, vessels and ornaments to decorate their clothing. Steppe artisans made small bronze plaques and roundels in abstracted animal and bird forms. Decorative one- and two-piece bronze buckles were another important steppe artifact. The horses that carried the steppe dwellers in life, and were often buried with them in death, were also decorated with bronze ornaments. Bronze is the best-documented artistic medium, but remains of wool and silk textiles, felt appliqués, wooden cups, leather bags, and birch bark containers have also been excavated at archaeological sites.

The only large-scale sculptures produced by the grasslands cultures are "deer stones," tall obelisk-like stones each depicting a simplified male figure. Details such as earrings, necklaces, and tools and weapons hanging from belts show us how the ornaments and gear were carried. Images of wild game, usually deer, were carved in low relief over the remaining surface. The deer stones were placed at cemetery sites, and more than 500 are known in Mongolia. Others have been found throughout the steppes as far west as Germany. Petroglyphs, simply incised figures of men, horses, and game animals cut into the rocks, have also been found in a few regions, like the Minusinsk basin in southern Siberia.
Fantastic animals like wolves with stag antlers and dragon-like creatures may refer to myths, epics and legends, aspects of religious beliefs now forgotten.

Many of the pieces on display here were used for personal ornamentation or as ornaments for the steppe dwellers’ horses.
- Which is your favorite decorative piece? Why? How was it worn?
- If you were to design a piece to wear, what would it be? How would it look?

Belt buckles and plaques were important in signifying rank within the clan or tribe. For example, a person with a large belt buckle was presumably more important than a person with a smaller buckle carrying the same motif. The most prestigious buckles were cast gold; some were inlaid with colored stones. Below this ranked gold-covered bronze, followed by the silver-colored tinned-coated bronzes. Most common were the plain bronze buckles.

Find the display cases that exhibit tools.
- Name some of the tools on display.
- Are they plain looking or decorated?
- What are some of the images used in decorating the tools?
- What do you think is the determining factor for whether or not a tool was decorated?

Can you find the cases that display ritual objects used in the steppe dwellers spiritual ceremonies?

- What are some of the items used by the shamans?
- What was the purpose of these items?
- How does the design of these items contribute to their usefulness in ceremonies?
- Choose your favorite ritual item. What makes it your favorite? How do you think it would be used? What makes you think it would be used this way?
- Are there decorative elements on this piece? What are they?

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