

MOBILE HOMES ON THE RANGE

Shamanism isn't a moral system like later religions. It is about finding out where the power is and how to make it do good things for you.

— curator Trudy S. Kawami

During the second and first millennia B.C., pastoral, nomadic people living on the Eurasian steppes decorated themselves, their horses, their chariots, and their dead with small bronze ornaments. Because these Bronze Age people had no cities or written records, much that is known about them has been deduced by examining their grave sites, which often contained bronze adornments, sacrificed animals, knives, tools, and bells.

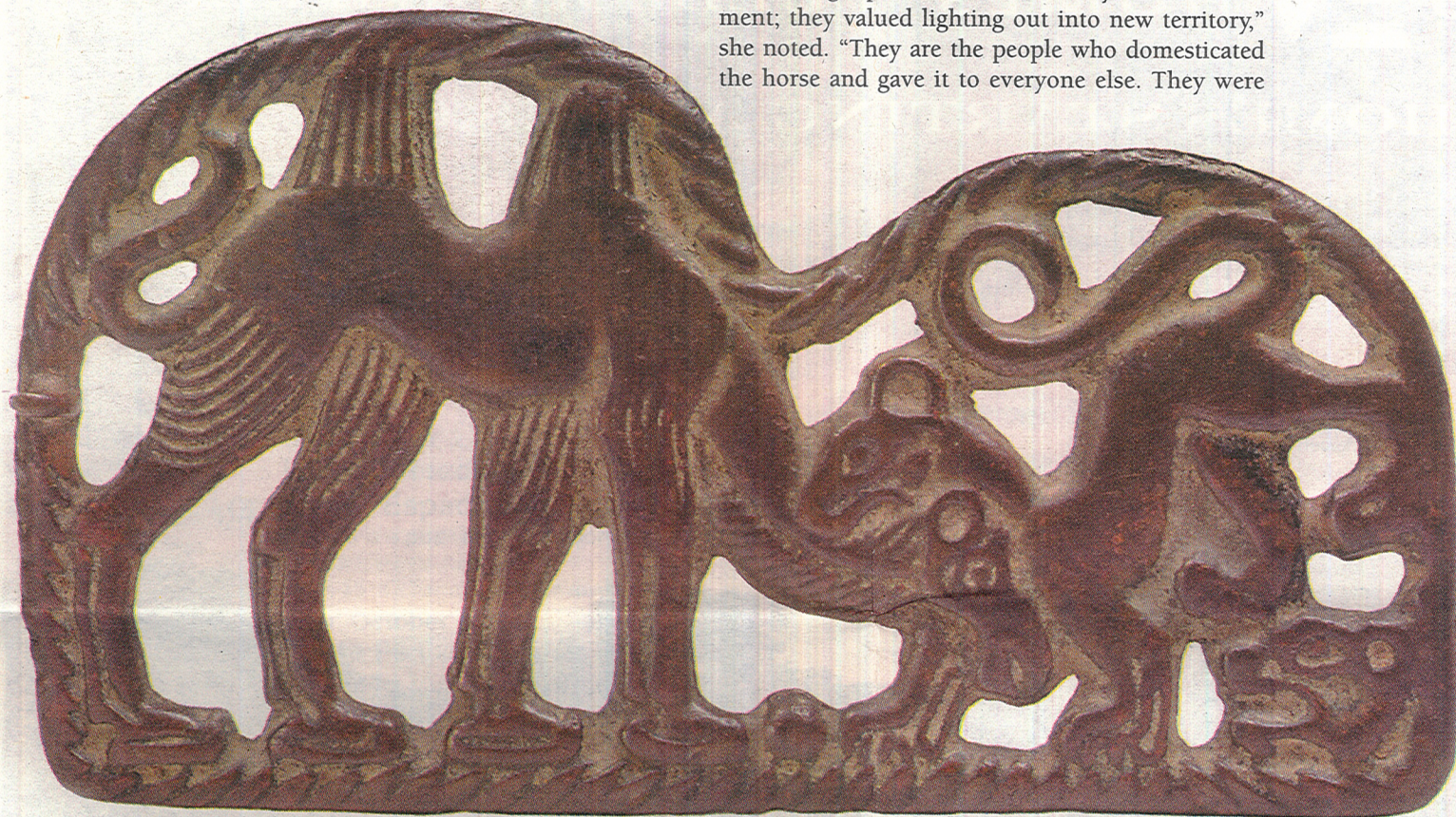
Ancient Bronzes of the Asian Grasslands From the Arthur M. Sackler Foundation, curated by Trudy S. Kawami (director of research at the Arthur M. Sackler Foundation in New York City), opens Friday, Sept. 28, at the New Mexico Museum of Art. The exhibit includes 85 bronzes that were buried with members of ancient Eurasian horse cultures. Among those items are belt buckles decorated with images of birds, griffins, stags, and wild cats; knives inlaid with turquoise; and spoons used by shamans.

The nomadic people who produced and owned these bronze objects held a view of life that was quite different from their city-dwelling neighbors, Kawami said during a phone interview. "They valued movement; they valued lighting out into new territory," she noted. "They are the people who domesticated the horse and gave it to everyone else. They were



Spoon
northeastern China,
eighth-sixth centuries B.C.

Images courtesy
Arthur M. Sackler Foundation,
New York



Buckle plaque
(camel and cat),
northern China,
second century B.C.

a conduit — a part of the great east-west road that eventually became the Silk Road that linked China and Rome.”

The grasslands these nomads regularly crossed reached into parts of present-day Hungary. Kawami explained that the travelers introduced the horse into Europe. The introduction of horses can radically change cultures, Kawami said, citing the example of North America. “Look at the Plains Indians; the horse transformed their culture in a matter of three generations.” But that only happened to tribes with access to abundant grazing pasture, she added. Native Americans who lived in arid parts of the West were far less affected by the horse’s introduction.

Ancient Bronzes focuses on items from the eastern edges of the nomads’ vast territory, where the horsemen carried on a vibrant trade with parts of China where the horse was an extravagance. “Horses didn’t do so well in China,” Kawami said. “The Chinese have always gone to the steppes to get new stocks of horses. Through the 1930s, horse breeders of the steppes supplied the track near Peking with race horses.”

Although historians have posited theories about daily life among ancient horse cultures, some of the oldest items in *Ancient Bronzes* confound. Kawami called one article, dated from the 13th to 10th century B.C., a “jingle thingy.” The wall label identifies it as a Curved Fitting With Jingles. It looks a lot like chariot gear found in tombs excavated in northern China. But carved markers called deer stones, found at burial sites throughout the steppes, suggests men may have hung the jingle thingies from their belts. A few such items, Kawami explained, have been found in graves lying near the waists of male skeletons.

The jingle thingy has two curved arms, each of which ends in a round bell. The one in *Ancient Bronzes* still produces a pleasant sound when shaken. Like a spoon and a curved knot opener in the exhibit — which have small dangling ornaments that would make a rattling noise — it was probably owned by a shaman. The shaman’s spoon is stunning; each of its hanging rattles is decorated with five adjoining circles.

“A shaman, even today, is a revered person,” Kawami said. “They have power, so they have to announce when they are coming.” The rattles and bells may have prevented others from accidentally



Belt ornament
(Bactrian camel and rider),
northwestern China
fourth century B.C.

bumping into or brushing against a shaman, she continued, adding that tools buried with shamans were often newer than those found in other graves. This suggests that the ancient horsemen believed the shamans and their tools held powers that could be dangerous or misused if wielded by others.

According to Kawami, “Shamanism isn’t a moral system like later religions. It is about finding out where the power is and how to make it do good things for you. Shamans had psychotropic agents, and those — combined with jingling, chanting, and drumming — would get them into a trance.” The Greek historian Herodotus, who lived in the fifth century B.C., described horsemen putting herbs on hot coals, breathing the smoke, and then laughing a lot, Kawami said. The horsemen had cannabis, and Herodotus didn’t understand what was going on, she added.

The ancient people of the steppes probably didn’t live past 50, Kawami said, and since they were nomadic, they didn’t have foundries. “In China we have foundries because everything was centralized; on the steppes everything was very decentralized.” Metalsmiths might have traveled a circuit. “It doesn’t take much to imagine a fair where everybody in a region gets together and looks for new horses, a bride for their son, or a metalsmith to make a new knife or buckle,” Kawami noted.

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Buckle,
northwestern China or Inner Mongolia,
fifth-fourth centuries B.C.

The artistry of many of these small bronze pieces is extraordinary. A belt buckle from southern Siberia depicts facing Bactrian camels. Their reins seem to billow, creating loopy curves, echoed by the animals' humps. The edge of their chests and stomachs rise in dramatic diagonals that play against the twists and open knots of ropes.

Many of the smaller pieces in *Ancient Bronzes* were attached to belts, collars, or cuffs. In some grave sites, dozens of identical ornaments have been found; their placement suggests that rows of ornaments ran along collars and down the fronts of jackets. One decoration, from the third century B.C., is shaped like a dead stag. The stag's head is seen in profile, its neck is foreshortened, and its legs fold under its body. It reveals an understanding of perspective that has been associated with art of the Italian Renaissance.

Kawami suggested that these ornaments might have hung on a fine lambskin jacket, perhaps with an embroidered Chinese silk lining. A grave site discovered in Siberia featured more than 60 horses buried along with a man and a woman. "They were wearing jackets made of arctic fox," she noted. They had probably traded with people who lived far to the north for the fox, and other items in the grave hinted that they participated in lines of trade that reached into China, she said. "The Chinese have always loved furs, but China is not fur country. Just think of what the fur trade did in 18th-century North America: think about the whole economic engine that drove trade and settlement."

When Kawami talks about the ancient peoples of the steppes, it's clear she can see them in her mind's eye. "These people wore colored, dyed leather and, of course, wool from their own sheep. They had Chinese silks and probably European linen. ... They would have been pretty dramatic in their appearance — the well-to-do — with their bronze or perhaps gold belt buckles, their daggers, and their jackets, collars, and cuffs covered with bronze deer."

Both the ancient Greeks and the Han Chinese wrote about the horse cultures of the steppes. But neither the Greeks nor the Chinese understood the pastoralists' lifestyle, Kawami said. They thought nomads were barbarians because they didn't live in cities. "The two groups didn't really understand each other, but they had what the other wanted," Kawami added. "And when they weren't trading, they were fighting. You can see how a nomad could go from a caravan guide to a bandit very easily. If they are not going to give you that bolt of silk and thank you for showing them where the water holes are, well then, you just take what you want." ▶

details

- ▶ *Ancient Bronzes of the Asian Grasslands From the Arthur M. Sackler Foundation*
- ▶ Opening/reception 5-8 p.m. Friday, Sept. 28; exhibit through Jan. 6, 2008
- ▶ "Ancient Bronzes of the Asian Grasslands: Who Wore Them and Why," lecture by curator Tudy S. Kawami; Sunday, Sept. 30 (no charge)
- ▶ New Mexico Museum of Art, 107 W. Palace Ave.
- ▶ \$8, \$6 New Mexico residents, no charge for New Mexico residents Sundays; no charge 5-8 p.m. Fridays; 476-5072



Finial for funeral canopy
(wild goat or ibex),
southwestern Inner Mongolia
fifth-sixth centuries B.C.