

A Sieneese Cassone
Asian Bronzes
A Spectacle of Wings

IN THE FOLLOWING CONVERSATION, director Marianne Doezema discusses the exhibition *Ancient Bronzes of the Asian Grasslands* with the organizing curator, Trudy Kawami, Director of Research for the Arthur M. Sackler Foundation. For more background about the exhibition, see page 5.

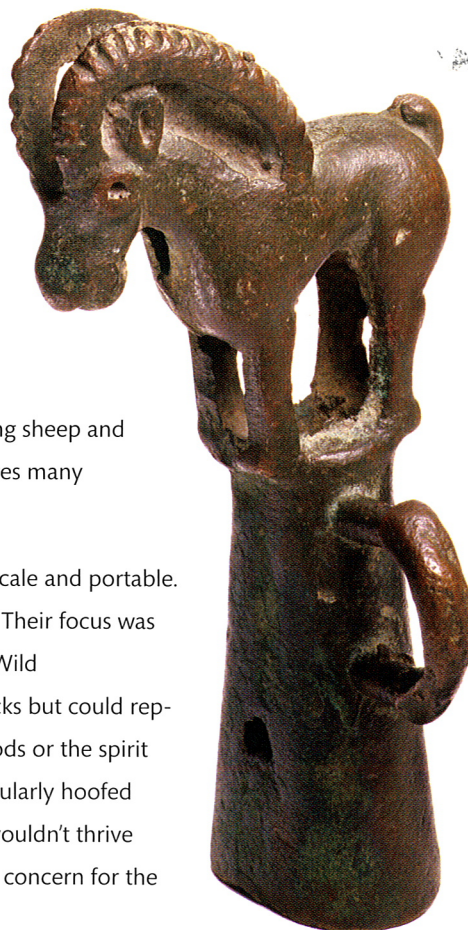
MD: Could you begin by telling me about the nomadic people who produced and owned the bronze objects that are featured in this stunning exhibition?

TK: In central Asia, nomadism began fairly late, in the second millennium BCE. It was brought about by the domestication of the horse and its later use for riding, as opposed to pulling things or being a source of meat. Over the course of the second millennium, the people of the grasslands recognized that with the horse, they could manage larger and larger flocks of sheep, goats, and cattle. It also meant that they could begin supplying livestock to other people living in the more settled urban areas of Asia. As this lifeway developed, it became necessary to move with livestock seasonally rather than staying in one place. As people moved out into the vast open spaces, regular grazing areas became identified for certain clans or tribes.

Along with these developments came international trade in livestock. Because they knew the land and the weather, the steppe dwellers became the guides and outfitters for international trade caravans that traveled along what is now known as the Silk Road, a trade network that eventually linked Rome with northern China.

MD: You have mentioned horses and herding sheep and cattle. Surely this is why the exhibition features many figures of animals.

TK: Exactly. Most of the steppe art is small-scale and portable. They wore it or adorned their horses with it. Their focus was on domesticated animals and wild animals. Wild animals were not only predators for their flocks but could represent aspects of the divine, signs from the gods or the spirit world. If the wild animals didn't thrive, particularly hoofed animals like deer, then the sheep and goats wouldn't thrive and man wouldn't thrive. So there was a real concern for the animals in their world.



Southwestern Inner Mongolia
Finial for funerary canopy
Bronze, 5th–4th century BCE
Photograph courtesy of the
Arthur M. Sackler Foundation,
New York

OPENING EVENTS

Thursday, 18 September, 5:00 pm
Exhibition opening and reception
Ancient Bronzes of the Asian Grasslands from the Arthur M. Sackler Foundation
Lecture by exhibition curator
Trudy S. Kawami, Ph.D.
Director of Research, Arthur M. Sackler Foundation
"Ancient Bronzes of the Asian Grasslands: Who Wore Them and Why?"
Gamble Auditorium

Thursday, 16 October, 5:00 pm
Exhibition opening and reception
A Spectacle of Wings: Photographs by Rosalie Winard
Lecture by the artist:
"An Itinerant Photographer of the Wetlands"
Gamble Auditorium

SPECIAL LECTURES

Thursday, 2 October, 5:00 pm
Lecture by Sandra L. Olsen, Ph.D.
Curator of Anthropology,
Carnegie Museum of Natural History
"Ancient Herders on the Steppe: A Multidisciplinary Investigation of their Lifestyle."
Gamble Auditorium

Yurt Construction
on Skinner Green
Tuesday, 23 September, 4:00 pm
(rain date, Wednesday,
24 September)
This fall Mount Holyoke students and Professors Christopher Pyle, Stephen Jones, and Peter Scotto will build a yurt, a tent-like structure, on Skinner Green in conjunction with the fall exhibition, *Ancient Bronzes of the Asian Grasslands*. While the yurt replaces traditional with modern materials, the principles of its construction are entirely consistent with those of yurts indigenous to the Eurasian Steppe. Since it was first erected on Skinner Green, the yurt has exercised a strange fascination for MHC students. No sooner does it go up, then students take their sleeping bags and camp out under its broad canvas dome. This source of its uncanny power has yet to be determined. A short talk will follow.

MD: We also see various manifestations of violence.

TK: Yes, there are predation scenes and fighting scenes, not only with wild animals preying on domesticated animals but also with fantastic animals fighting each other. On one belt buckle, we even have two horses fighting each other. One of the subtexts here is that with open spaces and freedom to move around, clear boundaries did not exist. Without clear boundaries, you can inadvertently get into stressful situations with other people. So there was an undercurrent of stress and of competition, and even violence. We are reminded of our image of the American west: open and free, as well as violent. So this sort of conflict goes along with the absence of clear organization and clear boundaries, as you would find in an urban or state-centered culture.

MD: I am fascinated by this beautiful buckle plaque.

TK: You see on this belt plaque a pair of confronted Bactrian camels munching on a twisted vine growing between them. These camels are actually hairy animals, with a mane and a fringed strip on their necks. Bactrian camels have a double coat; the fine soft undercoat is the source of true camel's hair cloth used to make very warm garments. These domesticated animals might be thought of as the 18-wheeler of the Silk Road trade because they could travel for days without drinking and carry great loads. Anyone who wore a buckle like this is suggesting that he is part of the Silk Road trade, and certainly the size and intricacy of design conveyed the elevated status of that individual.

MD: I understand that shaman in this culture was someone who linked the material world with the supernatural. How did they do that and how were some of these objects used by a shaman?

TK: A shaman was a special individual who had been called by some experience or some spirit to the role. This man or woman served as a link between the mundane world we can see and the spirit world, which is both above us and below us. When something goes wrong in the mundane world, if someone gets sick or doesn't reproduce, a shaman has an out-of-body experience, traveling to the spirit world with his spirit guide, into the realm below or above, to find out what is wrong and what needs to be done. It might be necessary to make offerings or prayers, to perform certain actions or even leave the area. The shaman achieves this out-of-body experience through a variety of methods, sometimes by meditating or sometimes by dancing and spinning, by jingling and singing repetitive chants, or even by the ingestion of hallucinogenic herbs. Both ephedra and hemp (cannabis) are native to the steppe. There is excavated evidence that hemp seeds were burned in rituals. By any of these means, the shaman could communicate with the spirit world. In some cultures the shaman is regarded as a very positive figure, and in others he, or she, is so powerful that he, or she, becomes frightening. They would often identify themselves with special garb, hung with lots of bells and jingly things. They might also have a mask and a drum.

There is one medallion in the exhibition, a frog medallion, which was very likely to have been worn by a shaman. The frog is a shape-changer because the animal grows from a translucent egg to a fish-like tadpole and then grows limbs to become a frog. They live in the water and they live out of it. So, they are a magical creature, and for the

peoples of the steppe the frog was a symbol of life, rebirth, and fertility.

Every shaman has his or her own companion animal—sometimes in a spirit form and sometimes in a real form—that transported them or even became them.

So, we're talking about shape-changers, magic mushrooms, ephedra, and hemp. These are what the big cauldrons in the exhibition are used to process. They were very special and were used for burning, or brewing, or smoking.

MD: I understand that it has been difficult to learn about how these objects were used. So, may I ask how you know that these cauldrons were not used for cooking?

TK: For one thing, there are very few of them. They are not in every grave but only in the graves of some elite who were buried with many bells and jingles. Knives with jingles on them have been found in some graves, as well as little spoons for measuring out those herbs. We also have pictographs—rock carvings—that show people drinking out of them or leaning over them with a straw. These pictographs occur in specific places that are numinous, have supernatural aspects to them. We never find these cauldrons in domestic situations.

MD: And can you tell me about this bronze finial, topped by an animal with huge horns?

TK: That is a wild goat. Notice the hole that would have been pegged into what would have been a staff or pole. On one side is a ring, which was probably to hold a curtain or hanging. Though these people did not have elaborate houses or palaces, they had very rich cemeteries. Some of the burial sites have been preserved in permafrost, which saved much of the organic material. In the center would have been a built box or room, much like a log cabin, that would be furnished. The deceased would have been laid out on the bed with poles around the bed with curtains and tapestries hung between them. So, we would expect to see four of these goats. The entire construction was then buried under a huge mound of stone, then earth, and then covered with turf.

MD: Thank you for helping us imagine the original setting for this object. And finally, could you tell us a little about how this collection was formed?

TK: Dr. Sackler was a collector of collections. His first love was China but then his interests pulled him outwards. He wanted to see and enjoy how China interacted with its neighbors, and among these neighbors were the steppe peoples. In the late 1950s and early 1960s he purchased five different collections of steppe bronzes. Four of these collections had been formed by medical missionaries and teachers from New England. They worked in China in the 1910s and 1920s and became fascinated by these objects. We know that some of these missionaries actually camped out on the Mongolian steppes during their summer vacations. They saw this area as very much like the American west—a place you visit in order to refresh yourself, to get out in nature. These small ornaments have a wonderful provenance, which linked the missionaries, and the contemporary viewer, to that natural experience.

INTERVIEW



Northern Hebei and western Liaoning, China
Pectoral Ornament
Bronze, 6th–5th century BCE
Photograph courtesy of the Arthur M. Sackler Foundation, New York



Southwestern Inner Mongolia
Belt ornament
Bronze, 6th–4th century BCE
Photograph courtesy of the
Arthur M. Sackler Foundation,
New York

Ancient Bronzes of the Asian Grasslands from the Arthur M. Sackler Foundation
2 September–14 December

THIS FALL the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum presents *Ancient Bronzes of the Asian Grasslands*, an exhibition that introduces modern viewers to the vibrant, awe-inspiring world of the eastern steppes through small, personal objects. With its geographic and historical remoteness, the nomadic population that produced these accomplished artworks is a fascinating and mysterious subject for historians and art historians alike.

Nomadic populations flourished across the wide expanse of grassy plains in central Asia, interacting with an environment characterized by extreme climate and majestic terrain. Original settlers in the region encountered the Gobi and Taklamakan deserts, the steep snowy Tien Shan mountains, as well as the more hospitable grasslands in which they established small villages in the second and early first millennium BCE. By the mid-first millennium BCE, some of the steppe dwellers had become seasonally migrating herders of sheep, goat, and cattle, and they adapted to a mobile lifestyle among the elements. As the Silk Road began to snake its way from Rome to the East in the first century BCE, these expert horsemen and breeders introduced the horse to China as an item of prestige and nobility, and participated fully in the exchange of goods between East and West. They functioned as intermediaries between empires, while assimilating and transforming artistic notions from each end of the known world. The selected pieces that comprise *Ancient Bronzes of the Asian Grasslands* represent in material form the fusion of the utilitarian and the spiritual culture of the steppe dwellers.

As in daily life, animals are integral motifs in the exquisitely worked bronze ornaments, belt-buckles, pendants, and weapons. Animals represented not only the primary form of livelihood for the steppe dwellers, but also reflected their shamanistic beliefs in animals as spirit guides and tribal totems, and serve as physical reminders of the codependence of human life and the natural world. These portable possessions, crafted from bronze for lightness and strength, were most often worn as personal decoration.

They also function as a manifestation of the steppe dwellers' culture, allowing us to piece together visual clues which may help us to fashion a more complete picture of this enigmatic civilization. The only surviving written records of this sophisticated and eminently skilled people are accounts written by non-native visitors. While these observations constitute a valuable piece of the historical puzzle, objects such as those included in *Ancient Bronzes of the Asian Grasslands* may be our only chance for direct conversation with their beliefs and practices, as interpreted by their own minds and hands. The epic struggles between the elegantly crafted creatures depicted in the objects may reflect myths and legends that would have been known intimately by the steppe dwellers, which have disappeared from human consciousness with time.