



Mabee-Gerrer Museum of Art

Start with Art

Ancient Bronzes of the
Asian Grasslands
from the Arthur M. Sackler Foundation

Exhibition Educator's Guide for Teachers and Parents

EXHIBITION INFORMATION:

About the exhibition:

January 23 – March 28, 2010: This exhibition presents for the first time a major sampling of the steppe art from the renowned collections of the late Arthur M. Sackler, M.D. The bronze ornaments, weapons, tools and vessels, most richly decorated with animal motifs, provide a glimpse into the lives of the ancient peoples of the steppes including their work, dress, spiritual beliefs and social structure.

About the Asian Grasslands and the ancient peoples that lived there:

The Eurasian grasslands (steppes) sweep across two continents and approximately 5,000 miles, ranging from northern China to Eastern Europe. The eastern-most steppes, called the Asian Grasslands, cover most of present-day Mongolia and Kazakhstan, and parts of China and Russia. The landscape of the Asian Grasslands is varied, as in addition to grassy plains, it includes soaring mountains, marshy wetlands, and vast deserts.

The earliest peoples to populate this area were settled farmers, hunters, and fishermen. However, by 1400 BCE, the primary inhabitants were nomadic peoples. These people belonged to many distinctive tribes and clans, and they spoke different languages; yet, they shared a similar way of life.

The steppe peoples were herdsmen, or pastoralists, who managed large herds of goats, sheep, cattle, camels, and horses. They ranged in a seasonal cycle over the grasslands, using horses (they were the first to domesticate these animals) to manage large herds and to travel far across the grasslands for the best grazing lands for their livestock. The steppe peoples had no permanent homes, living instead in portable structures similar to Turkic *yurts* or Mongolian *gers*.

The ancient steppe dwellers were also traders. They provided meat, wool, leather, fur, precious stones, and livestock (especially horses) to the settled regions of Asia. The settled people in turn provided the nomadic peoples with manufactured goods and agricultural produce. Furthermore, the steppe peoples were involved with the transportation of goods and ideas between China and Rome as they guided and supplied the trade caravans that followed the major ancient trade routes, collectively known as the Silk Road, where it crossed the grasslands.

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The steppe peoples shared similar religious beliefs, practicing shamanism. According to this practice, a special man or woman, the shaman, acted as an intermediary between the human and spirit worlds, contacting both human and animal spirits to help solve the steppe dwellers' problems.

All of the steppe dwellers wore sleeved leather jackets, boots, and belts. The men wore trousers and the women wore long skirts. They decorated their ensembles with ornaments made of fabric, fur, and metal. The status of the men and women coincided with the degree of decoration applied to their outfits. Belt buckles were also important in conveying the rank and wealth of the wearer. From their belts, these ancient peoples also hung the tools of daily life, knives, awls or punches (for leatherwork), axes and adzes (for woodworking), bows and arrows

The arts of the steppe peoples are small and portable, owing to their nomadic lifestyle. They favored bronze for its durability and used it to make a variety of tools, weapons, vessels and ornaments. They decorated these objects with images of the domesticated animals they cared for and the wild animals they hunted (deer, *argali* sheep, mountain goats and ibex). Leopards, tigers, bears, and birds of prey also adorn objects. These predators of the steppes may have served as clan or tribal totems. The more fantastic animals that appear on the artworks, dragon-like and other exotic creatures, likely refer to lost legends or religious beliefs.

POINT-OF-ENTRY:

Cast an Ornament:

OK PASS (listed for 6th grade but applicable to additional grade levels): VA 3.1-2, 3.5, 4.1-3

Introduction: The ancient peoples of the Asian steppes used bronze to create many of their artworks. They *cast* the molten metal in molds. For more information about the casting process, please download the handout *Making Bronzes* at <http://www.mgmoa.org/education/programs-for-schools/start-with-art>. While it is impossible for students to cast metal without the proper knowledge and equipment, it is simple for them to learn about the process of open-mold casting by using plaster. The following activity details how to make both a simple mold and a cast ornament based on the ornaments in the exhibition.

Supplies (per person): 1 sheet of white paper (or journal page), 1 pencil, 1 two-inch strip of cardstock or poster board (long enough to encircle the design), tape, ½-1 lb of sculpting material (clay or dough), wax or parchment paper, rolling pen (optional), modeling tools (or other creative implements), toothpick, water, small mixing bowl, measuring cups, plastic spoon, paint, paint brushes, palette or disposable plate, fine-grit sandpaper (optional).

1. At the museum, observe the bronze ornaments created by the ancient steppe peoples.
2. Visit <http://www.mgmoa.org/education/programs-for-schools/start-with-art> to download a handout with step-by-step photos of this project and a handout with pictures of select bronze ornaments from the exhibition.
3. Sketch a design for your ornament. You will use this sketch to act as a guide for making your mold so try to keep it simple, but consider including an animal motif important to the ancient steppe dwellers. Also, due to the casting process, a simple circular or rectangular perimeter is recommended. Your design will be reversed in the casting process, keep this in mind as you design your ornament.

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4. Roll or pat out the sculpting material on a flat surface covered with wax or parchment paper. The diameter of the rolled-out material should be about 2" wider than the widest part of your object. It should be at least 1/4-1/2" thick.
5. Lay your sketch over the rolled-out material. Using your pencil, trace your design. Press down firmly (but not too hard) to create an impression in the material. When you've traced the design, carefully peel off the paper.
6. Using your modeling tools, fingers, pencil, a toothpick and/or other implements press into the sculpting material, creating indentations, to give your design some depth. Remember, the further down you press, the more that area will stick out in the final sculpture. Be careful not to push in too deep and compromise your mold by creating a hole.
7. Make sure the 2" piece of poster board or cardstock is long enough to encircle the design. Tape the ends of the strip together to make a ring. If you want a rectangular border, fold the ring into the necessary shape. Press it into the sculpting material to create a wall around the impression of your design. Now you have created a mold!
8. In a plastic bowl, mix the plaster according to the package instructions (usually 3 parts plaster to 2 parts water). Add the plaster to the water slowly and stir thoroughly to avoid getting lumps. Spoon the plaster into the mold, be sure to completely cover your design and fill the mold about 1/2" full. Try to smooth the surface of the plaster with your spoon. This will be the base of your ornament. Work quickly, you need to finish before the plaster starts to set. While the plaster is still soft, scratch your name and date into it with a toothpick. Don't push down too far! Let the plaster dry for several hours or overnight. NOTE: DO NOT POUR WET PLASTER DOWN THE SINK. Wait until it is dry and chip it out of the bowl into the garbage.
9. Pull the sculpting material away from the plaster and remove the ring. You can use a damp cloth to gently remove any sculpting material adhering to the cast. If necessary, you may use a fine-grit sandpaper to smooth the surface and remove any imperfections.
10. You can now color your cast ornament with paint. Why not try to emulate the patina seen on the bronzes in the collection. Paint the ornament dark brown. After the brown thoroughly dries, paint over it with a green wash (green paint mixed with a little water). While it is wet, dab the green paint with a paper towel or napkin to create texture and reveal the brown paint beneath. Wait for the paint to dry before proudly displaying your finished ornament!

CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS:

Social Studies:

OK PASS (listed for 6th grade but applicable to additional grade levels): **WS 1.1-3, 2.1, 3.2**

Additional information and resources for this Curricular Connection available at:

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/lessons/12/q35/boundariesmove.html>

Ask students to discover the location of Asian Grasslands on a map (available at **<http://www.mgmoa.org/education/programs-for-schools/start-with-art>**). They should look at the topographical map showing the Silk Road and compare it with the map of the Grasslands. As a class, discuss the varied landscape of the steppe. Then, students should research the Asian steppe to determine reasons why the early steppe dwellers abandoned a sedentary agricultural life for a nomadic lifestyle. Their research should include environmental factors including: lack of sufficient rainfall or water

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for irrigation, lack of arable soil, regions with very short growing seasons, areas of extreme environmental/weather conditions, and areas of extreme elevation.

Download the Trade and the Silk Road handout at <http://www.mgmoa.org/education/programs-for-schools/start-with-art>. Examine the list of exports of central Asia as described around 985 C.E. by the Arabic geographer al-Muqaddasi. Which of these exports were likely those of the steppe dwellers? Have students create a large map of central Asia, find the current locations of these ancient areas on the map, and label those areas with the appropriate goods. Draw in the routes of the Silk Road where they passed through central Asia. Then, as a class, discuss the steppe people's interaction with sedentary cultures, particularly focusing on trade. Discuss the role of the steppe people in trade along the Silk Road. How did trade along the Silk Road lead to the steppe people's influencing and being influenced by the sedentary cultures? Discuss Dr. Kawami's information about the Chinese influence on the steppe dwellers.

Language Arts:

OK PASS (listed for 6th grade but applicable to additional grade levels): **R/L 5.1; W/G/U&M: 1.1-5**

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Discuss the contemporary countries that are home to the Asian Grasslands: Mongolia, Kazakhstan, China, and Russia. Students should research and determine whether the modern nomads living in these countries within or around the steppe share any cultural similarities with their ancient ancestors. As a class, make a list of similarities and differences between the ancient and contemporary nomads.

After researching the ancient and modern nomads of the Asian steppe, ask students to write several journal entries from the point of view of a modern pastoralist. The journal entries should include information about how the nomads rely on the animals they herd, how they adapt to their environment, how their lifestyle is similar and different to that of their ancient ancestors, and how contemporary events and changes in the steppe area are affecting their lifestyles.

Science and Math:

OK PASS (listed for 6th grade but applicable to additional grade levels): **LS 3.2, 4.1-2; MPS 5.1,4**

Have students research the different biomes represented in the area of the Asian Grasslands: steppe, desert, desert scrub, wetlands, and mountains. This would work well as a group project, with each group researching a specific area. Students should look for information about the terrain and climate in addition to the plants and animals specific to these areas. (A good example of this is available at: http://www.blueplanetbiomes.org/world_biomes.htm.) As a class, create graphs examining the differences between the terrain and climate of the areas (considering rainfall, weather patterns, elevation, soil, seasons, etc.). Students should then diagram the ecosystems and create food webs for the biomes they've researched.

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