Dear Educator,

The Dennos Museum Center is proud to present Ancient Bronzes from the East Asian Grasslands from the Arthur M. Sackler Foundation. Included in this packet are: key themes, a map of the area, a vocabulary list, an explanation of piece molding, and select images for use in the classroom. A PDF version of this packet with color images can be found online at www.dennosmuseum.org.

Dennos Museum Center K-12 educational programming aligns with Michigan Content Standards for Arts Education and the National Standards for Arts Education. We especially strive to provide experiences that will fit into a curriculum for the new Michigan Merit Curriculum for the Visual Performing and Applied Arts. To this end, experiences at the Dennos Museum Center highlight aspects of the creative process. In order to make sure that your tour addresses what you are doing in the classroom, please inform the docent (volunteer tour guide) when contacted of any special interests or needs. For details on content standards addressed by educational programming, please go to www.dennosmuseum.org/education/schools/resources/.

Please discuss your field trip goals with your docent prior to arriving at the museum. We are exciting to work with you to create a successful and fun visit to the Dennos Museum Center.

Thank you for visiting the Museum and we look forward to seeing you soon!

The Dennos Museum Center Educational Department
KEY THEMES

Creating a cultural context for these bronzes can tell us about when and where artifacts originated as well as offer insight into a piece’s unique composition of materials. In addition, the field of scholarship regarding the vast diversity of cultures and social groups in the Eurasian steppes must be expanded in order to give a function and a voice to the artifacts. What can these artifacts tell us about the people who made them?

“Reading” artifacts- In the absence of written texts or histories, visual culture becomes an important primary source material. With a critical eye, we can closely look at one of these bronzes, and we can ‘read’ or decode its visual language. When we analyze what we see, we can understand what was important to a certain social group at a specific period of time in history.

These objects are functional- Artifacts like these bronze pieces are not simply a creative expression of beliefs, cultures, or the natural world. In nomadic cultures, like those of the Eurasian steppes, the functionality of an object is its most important facet. Objects were made first to be practical and to conform to a nomadic lifestyle; aesthetics were a very secondary consideration.

The cultures of the Eurasian steppes are culturally and ethnically autonomous from the Chinese- A very important aspect of this exhibition is to contribute to the fairly lean scholarship regarding the Steppes region. Throughout history, these extremely diverse groups of people have been a side note: lumped into the larger narrative of China. It is important to recognize, through the findings of metallurgy, anthropology, and art history, that these cultures have a very rich and unique history that remains to be told.
ABOUT THE COLLECTION

The Arthur M. Sackler collection of *Ancient Bronzes of the Eastern Eurasian Steppes* is formed from artifacts found at several archaeological sites throughout the vast grasslands of modern day Northern China and Mongolia. Dr. Sackler once said, “I collect as a biologist. To really understand a civilization or a society, you must have a large enough corpus of data.” In keeping with Dr. Sackler’s scientific approach to art, the Foundation seeks to study these objects less for their aesthetic qualities, than for their wealth of untapped clues into cultures so long misunderstood or obscured by lack of primary source material. The study of the cultures of the Eurasian Steppes is a relatively new field, very much in its infancy; with this collection and its cataloguing of metallurgical, epochal, iconographical, and anthropological information, the Sackler Foundation seeks to engage broader and more informed scholarship and discussion about these complex cultures, as well as the influence they may have wielded.
WHO WERE THE PEOPLE OF THE EASTERN EURASIAN STEPPES?

Throughout the first and second millennia BCE, many different societies began to flourish across Northern China, Mongolia, and Eastern Europe. This geographical region is known as the Eurasian Steppes—an area characterized by sweeping grasslands, abrupt mountain ranges, as well as vast deserts. With such topographical variation, one can imagine that there was similarly much variation in lifestyle, culture, and art forms among the different societies living in the region.

Many groups were nomadic: they moved with the seasons, looking for new sources of water, or grazing land for their livestock. They erected huts, which we call ‘yurts,’ wherever they stopped for a time and packed them up when they were ready to move again. Not all cultures in the Eurasian Steppes were nomadic. Some were pastoral, sedentary people who were very much settled in one place.

The horse was a vital element in the lives of the Steppe peoples. It facilitates hunting, herding, long-distance travel, and warfare. The horse was first domesticated in the Steppes and later traded to the rest of the world. Trade was integral to these cultures as well. Many trade routes, such as the Silk Road, passed through the Steppes on their way to China. This intermediary position enveloped the cultures of the Steppes in the exchange of goods, ideas, and art forms.

Finally, despite the regional differences between societies, the people of the Steppes demonstrated a penchant for metalworking, specifically working with bronze. They cast objects that were visually appealing, but more importantly, they made functional objects ranging from belt buckles, knives, and funerary objects. These bronzes described regional flora and fauna, spiritual beliefs, and power structures using a visual language of colors, materials, and symbols which could be “read,” or decoded and understood, by other Steppe people to demonstrate where they were from and what social position they held in their own society.
OBJECTS

Spoon (V-3109)
Bronze
Northwestern China, 13th-11th century BCE

This spoon was found in an excavated grave in Northern China at the waist of a buried man. The loops on the handle of the spoon indicate that the utensil was worn suspended from owner’s belt. For a group of people whose society was nomadic, it was important for them to have essential tools like a spoon or a knife made to fit this lifestyle. They are portable and easily accessible. This spoon has two pendants hanging from the handle that make a jingling sound when the spoon is moved. This effect and aesthetic was popular with pastoral groups in the Eurasian steppes, but the spoon’s functionality is its primary purpose.

Finial (V-3848)
Bronze
Northern China, 6th-5th century BCE

A finial such as this piece, a horse with a hollow base, would be used to adorn the top of a post or a staff. It was most likely used as a decoration for a canopy used in a customary burial ritual of an elite member of society. Objects like this finial functioned as prestige items, to convey the status of its owner within the hierarchy of their group. This piece also reflects a style and casting process that has been noted in other regions, specifically southern Siberia. Long-distance trade routes passed through the steppes, and objects like this are evidence of the cultural exchange that occurred as a result.
Recumbent deer yoke ornaments
(V-3129 & V-3130)
Bronze
Southwestern Inner Mongolia and northwestern China, 5th-4th century BCE

The image of a recumbent deer is found throughout the Eurasian steppes with regional variations. The motif is far-reaching: being found on Chinese tombs and on figures as far West as the Black Sea. This further indicates an historical, widespread exchange of ideas and art forms, as well as the people of the Steppes’ awareness and involvement in this cultural interconnection throughout history. The function of these objects is not clear. Some scholars believe they adorned the yoke of a wheel, possibly in a funerary ritual. It is important to note the relative lack of scholarship regarding the region and the people of the Steppes and the need for further intensive research that can give a voice to ambiguous artifacts. If we can uncover the function of these recumbent deer pieces, for example, we can unearth new insight into the cultural fabric of its creators.

Belt ornament (camel & rider)
(V-3606)
Tinned bronze
Northwestern China, 4th century BCE

This piece is one half of a belt buckle that would have hooked together with its mirror image. It depicts a Bactrian camel—a species from much further South and West, and its foreign rider. Scholars speculate that the rider is foreign because his facial features, specifically his nose, are different from the regional physiognomy of Eurasian people. This camel and its rider would have been part of a trade caravan passing through the Steppes along the Silk Road. Metallurgy tells us a great deal about this artifact. The buckle is coated in a layer of tin, a process believed to indicate status. The intercultural exchange that occurred through commercial trade in the Steppes along the Silk Road was vital. Whoever wore this belt buckle visibly embodied the relationship between foreign trade and high social ranking.
By the 2nd century BCE, a group called the Xiongnu had conquered much of the Steppe peoples and amazed a vast empire. The Xiongnu began domesticating camels—the foreign creature of interest in the former belt buckle, and sold them for profit. As a motif, the camel is now domesticated within the traditional shapes and relaxed, nature designs typical of Steppes material culture. This belt plaque was placed chronologically and geographically through X-ray spectrometry. This metallurgical process found an arsenic alloy in the bronze, which was common in 2nd century BCE Southern Siberia—demonstrating the widespread cultural practices that the Xiongnu brought to their empire. When science and material culture are examined together, we are able to gain a wider view of practices, ideas, and interests of specific cultures through history—ones that have not necessarily received much investigation in the past.
**VOCABULARY**

**Steppe** - a vast, semiarid grassland like that which covers most of Central Asia

**Pastoralism** - a social and economic system, or lifestyle, centered around raising livestock

**Sedentary lifestyle** - describes a society that is not migratory, but remains living in one place

**Nomadic lifestyle** - describes a society that is migratory, living in no fixed place, moving in accordance with the seasons, livestock, food or water supplies

**Transhumance** - specifically describes the nomadic transfer of livestock from one grazing ground to another, as from lowlands to highlands, with the changing of seasons.

**Metallurgy** - the scientific study of metals and their properties; by studying the alloys in the composition of the metals used in these pieces, metallurgists can make an educated guess as to the origin or function of an object

**Cultural Interconnection** - the idea that cultures, no matter how disparate, are built upon and thrive through mutual exchange of ideas, beliefs, and materials

**Archaeology** - the study of past human life through the examination of material objects/artifacts

**Artifact** - an object produced by human intervention or craft; of interest to archaeologists, anthropologists to better understand past human cultures, developments

**Yurt/Ger** - a circular, domed, deconstructable and portable tent used by the nomadic peoples of Central Asia; ‘yurt’ is the common term adopted by English-speaking people, which comes from the Turkish language; ‘ger’ is a more regionally accurate term used by the Mongolian people for the dwelling

**Material Culture** - the study of artifacts, assuming that the creation of anything by humans indicates the human thought process, to determine the beliefs, values, and ideas of a human society

**Ritual Expression** - the function of an artifact, in ritual and practice, can indicate a great deal as well about the values, beliefs, and ideas of a people.

**Status Symbols** - certain artifacts are known to have indicated power and social ranking; through them, we can learn about the structure of past human societies
BRONZE CASTING

**Piece-Mold Casting** - To make a bronze vessel, a clay model of the bronze vessel-to-be had to be fashioned. When it hardened, soft clay was pressed against it, taking on the negative impression of both its shape and decoration. These clay pieces were removed in sections to form the piece-molds. The model was then shaved down to become the core (the walls of the bronze vessel would exactly equal in thickness this layer that had been shaved off). The piece-molds were then reassembled around the core. Molten bronze would then be poured into the space between the mold and the core. After cooling, the mold pieces were removed. Pre-cast appendages were often inserted into the core-mold assemblage before casting; when the vessel was produced, they became locked into place as the metal was poured in.

![Diagram of a bronze vessel with piece-molds](image)

**Two-piece Mold Casting** - a more simple casting process that only requires two molds, which would be inserted together and molten bronze would be poured into the cast to take the shape of the mold.
TIMELINE OF ANCIENT NORTHERN CHINA/EASTERN EURASIA

Bronze Age - a period of time in human history that is characterized by the use of weapons and implements made of cast bronze; in Eastern Asia/China it is generally dated between 2000 BCE – 700 BCE

Iron Age - a period of time in human history that was characterized by rapid spread of the use of iron in metalworking; in Eastern Asia/China it is generally dated between 600 BCE – 200 BCE

Xiongnu - The Xiongnu emerged in areas that encompassed parts of today’s Mongolia in the last centuries BCE and by the early part of the second century BCE had consolidated power over much of the steppe and for some time held the upper hand in their relations with the powerful Han Dynasty in China. Xiongnu power declined gradually under pressure from the Han and other contenders for control of the steppes and Inner Asian trade routes.

It was during the period of Xiongnu power that we traditionally date the beginnings of the “Silk Road” across Eurasia; the Xiongnu obviously played a key role in the transmission of goods and culture. Various artifacts found in tombs by archaeologists attest to connections with China and with western Eurasia.

Xianbei - The Xianbei gained strength beginning from the 1st century CE and were consolidated into a state in 147. He expelled the Xiongnu, thus securing domination of the key areas in what is now Mongolia. The Xianbei successfully repelled an invasion of the Han Dynasty in 167 and conquered areas of northern China in 180.

The ruler of the Xianbei state was elected by a congress of the nobility. Besides extensive livestock husbandry, the Xianbei were also engaged at a limited scale in farming and handicrafts. The Xianbei fractured in the 3rd century CE.