

# Across Cultures: Gold of Ukraine and Singapore

By Daniel Tham

The latest travelling collection to grace the National Museum of Singapore's (NMS) galleries arrives courtesy of the National Museum of the History of Ukraine and the Museum of Historical Treasures of Ukraine. Totalling 260 artefacts from the eighth century BCE to the 19<sup>th</sup> century CE, this collection of gold, silver, bronze and ceramic treasures presents the rich history of Ukraine by way of the various settlements and nomadic groups that inhabited the vast coastal and steppe regions north of the Black Sea, in today's Ukraine. Aside from the aesthetic qualities of these treasures, each piece sheds light on the social and cultural perspectives of these ancient tribes and settlements.

While the Scythian period, between the seventh to third centuries BCE, is generally well-documented, that of the Cimmerians, whom the Scythians displaced, are less well-known. The oldest objects on display in the collection are an eighth century BCE Cimmerian torque and pin. The information derived from these decorative pieces, however, is modest compared to the sheer volume and iconographical richness of the Scythian objects on display, many crafted extravagantly in gold. Found mostly in burial mounds for royalty, aristocrats or high-ranking military personnel, these archaeological finds testify to the highly elitist structure of Scythian society.

The Scythians' regard for gold is evident not only in their preference for the precious metal, but also in their distinctive iconography. The griffin, for example, is a common decorative motif since Scythian lore associated griffins with gold. The Greek historian Herodotus related one such tale of griffins guarding gold deposits from the one-eyed Arimaspeans. In reality, the greatest obstacle to acquiring gold was most likely the arduous journeys to the alluvial basins of Lake Balkhash and through the mountain ranges



*This cover of a gorytus (a bow and quiver case) was most probably crafted in the Bosphoran workshops in Panticapaeum, a leading centre of gold-work*

of Altai, which means 'gold' in Mongolian.

The imagery depicted on the Scythian treasures demonstrates a syncretism that increased over time, suggesting the high degree of interaction between nomadic groups like the Scythians and settlers such as the Greeks.

One of the exhibition's highlights, a gold *gorytus* (bow and quiver case) cover, is embossed with a series of scenes that may be episodes from the life of Achilles or an Iranian coming-of-age epic. Through their early

trading settlements of Berezan and Olbia, the Greeks had been established in the region since the seventh century BCE. The Scythians lived mostly in peaceful coexistence with the Greeks whom they traded with and were influenced by, as the exhibition's many Greek-inspired artefacts attest.

While the Scythian period is a distinctive highlight of Ukraine's early history, the material culture of subsequent periods and groups is also covered in the exhibition. The presentation is not strictly chronological. It is object-based and conceptualised around the interaction between nomads and settled groups, a recurring theme throughout the region's history. Apart from the jewellery and weaponry so essential to the identity and survival of each tribe, there are also unique displays in the **Nomads** section, of pole-tops



*Obverse view of the Roman medallion featured on the cover. It commemorates the Roman victory over the Samartians (c.358 CE)*



*This torque and pin, the oldest among the artefacts on display, demonstrate the Cimmerian taste for decorative shapes.*



The Hun preference for inlaying red stones such as garnets with granulated decorations around each stone, is illustrated in this sword, most probably belonging to a Hun general



The scabbard of this Scythian sword features a boar's head as well as a dramatic scene of a stag being attacked by a griffin and a lion, with two leopards crouching behind

and horse ornaments, suggestive of their worldviews and lifestyles. The displays in the **Settled** section present the cultural peaks of the established settlements, from the early Greek colonies to the Kievan Rus' Empire (late ninth to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries) and the decorative art traditions of Ukraine up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Symbolically, a display of Greek and Roman

coinage links the two main sections, an important reminder of the economic underpinnings of their interactions.

The curators' non-chronological approach to the material draws attention to the diversity of the region's nomadic and settled life and the complex social, cultural, economic and military interactions that occurred. Grouping the objects according to their form and use allows for a comparison of artistic style, technique and



Along with the Mace of the City of Singapore, this pendant medallion was commissioned by the Chinese community in Singapore to commemorate Singapore's city status, conferred in 1951, image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore

iconography. It is fascinating, for instance, to contrast the Scythians' graphic approach to embossing swords, with the Huns' decorative use of granulated stone inlays on theirs a thousand years later.

The development of a distinctive Ukrainian culture and artistic tradition is explored in the **Settled** section. The Byzantine influence was the most pronounced after the Kievan Rus' state's acceptance of Christianity in 998 CE, when its aristocracy assumed the Byzantine court's traditions and fashions. A pair of 11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> century cloisonné enamelled gold temple pendants exemplifies this, since the technique was learned from 10<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine masters. Later works, from the 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, showcase the development of the decorative arts tradition of Ukrainian master craftsmen. The Ukrainian pieces are presented not as derivative works, but rather as exemplars of the multifaceted influences that they embraced.

The theme of cross-cultural influences is expanded upon with a parallel display of gold from Singapore.

This section traces Singapore's gold tradition back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century with the settlement's beginnings under the Majapahit Empire and the subsequent stylistic influences from the neighbouring Malay Archipelago in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This provides the context for appreciating the diversity of the gold jewellery of Singapore's various communities, epitomised by the ornate 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Peranakan pieces, a charming amalgamation of Malay, Indonesian, Chinese and Indian traditions. Tribute is also paid to the local goldsmiths who produced these pieces and the retail culture of the goldsmith shops of South and North Bridge Roads from the 1930s.

The Singapore section picks up a theme in the Ukrainian treasures exhibition, namely the symbolic significance of gold as an element of identity formation and the assertion of political power. Universally appreciated as a symbol of wealth, status and prestige, gold has been central to state-led nation-building programmes. This is evident in Greek and Roman coinage that celebrates military conquests and political dominance, as well as in the Singaporean coins and medallions that commemorate the important milestones in the nation's history. It is in this sense that gold truly transcends cultural and national boundaries as an enduring symbol of beauty and power, an overarching theme that sums up the rich comparative content and the relevance of this unique exhibition.



This Peranakan brooch set with four-set diamonds features a charming motif of a bird surrounded by lush foliage, image courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum

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**Daniel Tham** is co-curating Gold Rush: Treasures of Ukraine with Wong Hwei Lian, with a focus on the Singapore section of the exhibition. He is the curator in charge of the Goh Seng Choo Gallery and the colonial sections of the Singapore History Gallery at NMS.

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