

Behind the Scenes of the Gold Rush

Treasures of Ukraine Exhibition

By Mirjam van der Sluis and Ekaterina Efanova

I have always had a fascination for doors marked 'Personnel Only', so when the research team for the *Gold Rush: Treasures of Ukraine* exhibition received an offer to write a 'behind-the-scenes' article, my hand was up before I knew it. Ekaterina was equally enthusiastic. Here we relate some of our behind-the-scenes experiences.

Mirjam: The first hurdle was passing through the 'Personnel Only' door. Security was really tight as this collection is priceless. I was allowed into the room where they were unpacking the artefacts, which had arrived from Japan. Two men from the shipping company had just opened one of the many big crates in the room. Inside, delicately wrapped in all sorts of soft materials, was one artefact. After unwrapping and photographing it, the conservator from the Heritage Conservation Centre, experts from the National Museum of Singapore (NMS) and the National Museum of the History of the Ukraine carefully examined a Scythian vessel. To do this, they used the artefact's condition report, documented by the lending museum's conservators and the description drafted in Japan, where the treasures had been exhibited before coming here. Thankfully nothing had happened during shipment. The minor cracks in the vessel were just ancient 'manufacturing faults', which had been there for centuries.

Unable to resist, I looked into the exhibition area and saw NMS co-curator Daniel Tham carefully building a display with jewellers' work tools, for the Singapore part of the exhibition. Instead of positioning one of the objects lying down, he had decided that it looked better standing up. And from a docent's perspective, I completely agreed with him. But the cover to be placed over the display was built for objects that were laid flat. Would the cover still fit? A little suspense, and then relief, it still fitted.



Stele, 6th century BCE, Scythian

the square metal frame to secure its position. It took half the day and a team of over 20 people to complete the task.

To my astonishment, I was allowed to hold treasures,

Ekaterina: I was blown away by the complexity and amount of work required for the installation of our first artefact – a 6th century BCE stele that had once stood on a burial mound. Ten people had to pull the 847 kg granite statue using a pulley system and metal chains, then very carefully place it on a metal-framed base. Wooden blocks were hammered between the stele's base (which was wrapped in protective cloth) and



Daniel Tham carefully organising little coins, for the Singapore part of the exhibition



The gold workers' tools being laid out by an exhibition team-member. second from right is the tool that should have been lying down.

some 2,500 years old, from tiny golden coins to a Scythian sword that was so heavy that I, unlike the ancient warriors, had to use both hands to lift it.

Some pieces with elaborate decorative elements, such as the pole top, looked fragile, as if they would fall apart if touched. Amazingly, many pieces had been preserved whole, in their original form, over many centuries! Many of the Greek ceramics had survived intact for over two millennia and Scythian metal pots and bowls were in such good shape that they could be used today.

In the end, all 260 treasures were unpacked and reviewed within three days and successfully handed over to NMS for temporary display in the Gold Rush exhibition. I came away with unforgettable stories and memories of my first behind-the-scenes museum experience.

Mirjam van der Sluis and Ekaterina Efanova are both FOM volunteer docents and members of the Gold Rush: Treasures of Ukraine exhibition's research team at NMS.

All photos by the authors