

DAVID AARON



Yak Statuette

China

Mid 7th to 4th Century B.C.

Bronze

L:10cm W:5cm H:10cm

A bronze statuette of a stylised yak, depicted with its head bowed forwards, and an extended tail folded over its humped back. The yak is evoked through simple, bold forms, with some additional incised details, such as the eyes, hooves, and the thick shaggy fur on the upper legs and lower belly.

The yak would have been cast using the piece mould technique, as demonstrated by the mould marks running down the vertical axis of the statuette. It would most likely have been an ornament for the yoke or finial of a chariot. Between the seventh and mid-fourth centuries B.C., such ornaments depicting standing and recumbent grazing animals were cast in matching sets of four or more to adorn the two-wheeled chariots of the nomadic people who lived in the Ordos Desert in northwest China.

Covered by rich vegetation and watered with plenty of rivers and streams, the Ordos Plateau encompassed the best grazing lands on the Asian Steppe in the first millennium B.C., and was home to nomadic herders who continually moved in search of pasture. The nomads lived on the plateau between the sixth and second century B.C., until they were driven out of the region by the Xiongnu.

Archaeological finds of skeletal remains and bronze objects provide much of our information about the Ordos. Master metalworkers, their artefacts include belt buckles, small weapons, and funerary cart and canopy ornaments. In contrast to later cultures and their contemporaries further east, tinned bronze, rather than silver or gold, was the most esteemed material. The bronzes are almost always zoomorphic, occasionally featuring predatory scenes, which has led to this art being termed 'Animal Style'. Because of their importance to the Ordos way of life, animals served as status markers and were associated with particular clans. The art style incorporates features of both Scythian and Chinese art of the period.

Ordos weapons found in tomb contexts particularly resemble those of Scythia and Saka.

Exhibitions

Mostra d'Art Cinese, Palazzo ducale, Venice, 1954.

Literature:

Mostra d'Art Cinese, Palazzo ducale, Venice, 1954 (exhibition catalogue), no. 146.

Alvise Zorzi, *Mongolia. Nelle steppe di Cinghis Khaan* (Venice, 1992), p. 184, fig. 9.

L'Arte Animalistica Della Steppe, *Ligabue Magazine*, 27 (1995), p. 134.