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Kazakhstan

Treasures of the Great Steppe

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Kazakhstan – one of the five countries in Central Asia at the crossroads of Asia and Europe – is known for its unique historical and cultural development. Through five cultural key stories, dating from the third millennia BCE to modern day, this exhibition aims to shed light on moments that have marked its civilisation.

Nomadic groups have been living on these lands since Antiquity, quickly domesticating this steppe region and building large urban dwellings. The abundance of natural resources contributed to the development of international trade routes and the growth of prosperous economic centres which have strengthened links between local populations, fostering the formation of a shared cultural identity. As time went by, this convergence point of civilisations was crossed by nomads from the East, like the Huns or the Scythians, and later the Turkic people. During the Turkic era, Arabs incursions introduced Islam and were followed by the Mongols invasions in the 13th century. After the slow decline of the Mongol empires, such as the famous Golden Horde, the country was dominated by local chiefs or “khans” who maintained successful trade and local culture, shaping the traditional Kazakh civilisation.



Tobol Thinker

The Botai culture of domesticating horses emerged from North Kazakhstan at the end of the Neolithic era, around the fourth millennium BCE. This is considered as the foundation of the steppe civilisation and led to its strong development over the next millennium.

The transition from the traditional hunting lifestyle to a productive economy of horse and cattle breeding (maintaining hunting as a complement) was a major part of Kazakhstan's legacy during this era. It reflects their deep understanding of the cycles of nature, the climate and the landscape, as well as the flora and fauna that surrounded them. This understanding is embodied in objects such as the remarkable "Tobol Thinker", also known as "Man watching the sky" which was discovered in the Kostanay region. This small anthropomorphic figure reflects the spiritual culture and philosophical vision of the early steppe nomads.

Tobol Thinker

Kostanay region

3rd to 2nd millennium BCE.

Sandstone

Kazakhstan, National Museum of the Republic
of Kazakhstan, ҚРҰМ уқ ТК-2-1408

The name "Tobol Thinker" alludes to Auguste Rodin's "The Thinker" (1904).

Sculpted in brown-grey sandstone, it has been meticulously polished. While it demonstrates a thorough understanding of anatomy, it is sculpted in a style which deliberately rejects proportions.

The combination of the figure's slight dissymmetry—with its head at one angle and body at another—and the tension between hollows and shapes lend inner life to the figure. Emphasis on the deep eye sockets accentuates his gaze towards the sky.



Golden Man

During the first millennium BCE, large tribal groups and proto-states shared the same culture and started to develop in the Eurasian Steppe, eventually giving rise to the emergence of nomadic tribes that the Greeks and Persians would later refer to as the Scythians, the Saka or the Sarmatians.

The largest Saka States were established in Zhetysay, in the south-east of Kazakhstan, in the northern steppe and lake region (Saryarka), close to the Aral Sea and in the Altai mountains. These diverse groups shared an ethnic affinity and a similar level of development and lifestyle which generated common cultures, technologies and productions. One example is gold work, of which “animal motif” objects became particularly popular.

The discovery in 1969 of the “Golden Man” in Issyk, Almaty region, caused a stir in the scientific community. The refinement of this man’s gold decorations and accessories attests to the mastery of goldsmithing techniques. The Golden Man also reflects the wealth of mythology and spirituality of the steppe civilisations. A silver bowl was also found near the same site bearing traces of the oldest writing ever found in Central Asia.

Ornamental elements on the Golden Man’s headdress

Discovered in Issyk (Almaty region)
4th–3rd millennium BCE.

Gold

Kazakhstan, National Museum of the Republic
of Kazakhstan, ҚРҰМНҚ 45360/2

The gold headdress of the Golden Man represented the cosmos for the Saka. It is divided into three kingdoms: underworld, earth and sky. It was designed to face four directions: left, right, front and back, the latter two representing east and west.

The headdress symbolises the wearer’s authority over the three kingdoms as well as the four directions in which the sun moves. The individual who wore this headdress possessed power over the entire cosmos; he embodied the centre of the universe. The symbols on his clothes and headdress illustrate Saka cosmogony.



Balbals

The Altai mountains was a region of great importance in the history of the Kazakhs and other Eurasian Turkic people. It is here, in the middle of the first millennium, that the Turkic culture and people became established, writing a new chapter in the history of the steppes. In the mid-6th century, a new type of confederation of Turkic tribes was created: the khaganate (empire). This model of statehood influenced the formation of the medieval states of Turgesh, Karluk, Kimak and Kipchak, marking the history of medieval Kazakhstan.

The Turkic people managed to find a balance between nomadic life and life in a sedentary, urbanised world, where trade, arts and science flourished. One of these cities, Otrar (also called Farab), was the birthplace of the early Islamic philosopher and musician Abu Nasr al-Farabi, also known as a “master” just like Aristotle and Avicenna.

One of the most emblematic monuments of the Turkic nomads are the megalithic stone stelae, the *balbals*. These anthropomorphic sculptures have stylized features to identify male or female figures and were prevalent throughout the Steppe.

Male/Female figure

Turkistan region

9th – 11th centuries

Stone

Kazakhstan, National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan, ҚРҰМ НҚ 28140, ҚРҰМ НҚ 24619

Sculpted in yellow-grey stone, one stele represents a man with a moustache. His stern and concentrated expression, indicating the importance of the person represented, is characteristic of most *balbals*. He is dressed in a kaftan with wide lapels and against his chest, in between his thumb and index finger, he is holding a cup, symbolising a commemorative or sacrificial ritual. His left hand is holding an object resembling a weapon. There are minimal details on the sides and back of the stele, but we can make out the lines of long plaits down his back, a typical hairstyle for Turkic male figures during that time.

The monolithic sculpture in grey granite is an example of a female figure. She is holding a cup with both hands (indicating that this stele was made after the male figure) and her breasts are clearly defined. However, there are minimal details of her face: the eyes and nose are depicted by a simple T, characteristic of sculptures by the Kipchak nomads. This style of sculpture puts the emphasis on the symbolic aspect of the figure. The pointed shape of the top of the stele may suggest a cap or the traditional headdress of Turkic wives: the “saukele”.



Lamps from the Khoja Ahmet Yasawi Mausoleum

Ahmet Yasawi was a poet and distinguished Sufi master from the 12th century who played a decisive role in the development of Islam and Sufism in the Turkic-speaking areas of Central Asia. He spent most of his life in the town of Yasi, now known as Turkistan, a prosperous oasis on the trade routes linking China to the Middle East.

His mausoleum was built during the rule of Timur (also known as Tamerlane), from 1389 to 1405. For this monument, Persian builders experimented new architectural solutions, notably blue and turquoise tiles decorated with geometric motifs, which were later used for the construction of Samarkand, the capital of the Timurid Empire. Today, it is one of the largest and best-preserved constructions by the Timurids whose vast empire included Iran and Central Asia.

Timur had commissioned six lamps for the interior. Made from metal, and probably inlaid with gold and silver, these lamps are a fine example of Islamic decorative art from the Timurid era. They were considered luxury items and were highly valued. They were inscribed with either the commissioner's or the artisan's name and the production date.

Lamps

Turkistan (Turkistan region)

1397

Bronze, probably inlaid with silver and copper which are no longer present

Kazakhstan, «Azret Sultan» State Historical and Cultural Reserve-Museum, ҚРҰМ үк 31352; ҚРҰМ үк 31353, ҚРҰМ үк 31354

The small bronze lamp weighs 41 kg and is decorated with inscriptions and ornaments made of silver and gold, featuring plant-style motifs. It was commissioned by Amir Timur for the Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi. As with the other lamps in this series, it is stamped with the date 17 June 1397, probably the date the lamps were completed and delivered to the mausoleum. It also shows the name of the master artisan: Izz-ad-Din ibn Taj-ad-Din Isfahani, written in Persian.

The elongated bronze lamp weighs 31.5 kg and is hollow inside. The lower part is comprised of two circles. The upper part gradually decreases in size and is topped with a small tube decorated with latticework rings with diamond shapes. The surface of the lamp is decorated with circular motifs. It is inscribed with the name of the master artisan, Izz-ad-Din ibn Taj-ad-Din Isfahani, suggesting that the artist was from Ispahan in Iran. The inscriptions also indicate that it was produced, or signed on 17 June 1397, at the request of Amir Timur for the mausoleum. There are several further inscriptions which attest to the intellectual and spiritual importance of Timur: "Lord of all Lords, the wise one whose words and acts are integral, the just, the guardian of faith and peace, the defender of Islam and Muslims, the guarantor of peace."



Chapan of Kazibek Bi Keldibekuly

Between the 15th and 17th centuries, the majority of modern Kazakhstan was ruled by the Kazakh Khanate (1465–1718). This was a state which succeeded the Golden Horde and was established around 1465–1466 in south Kazakhstan by two descendants of Genghis Khan, Kerei Khan and Janibek Khan, while the hegemony of the Mongols and the Golden Horde was reaching an end in Eurasia.

It was during this period that the Ming (1368–1644) came to power in China after the fall of the Yuan dynasty (1234–1368) founded by the Mongols, and when Ivan III of Russia, also known as Ivan the Great, (r. 1462–1505), declared the independence of Russia from the Golden Horde in 1480.

The emergence of the Kazakh Khanate marked a turning point in the history of Kazakhstan: it was established as an ethnic and cultural community for the Kazakhs. Its governance continued to respect existing political alliances and states and judicial authority was exercised by judges elected by the people. Their court, which was adapted to nomadic or semi-nomadic life, continued to be used until the early 19th century. One of these judges was a distinguished diplomat and statesman, Kazibek Bi Keldibekuly (1667–1764).

Chapan

Central Kazakhstan 17th–18th centuries

Brocaded silk or silk with gold and silver
metallic threads

Kazakhstan, National Museum of the Republic
of Kazakhstan, ҚРҰМ НҚ 5336

The *chapan* is a traditional coat worn in Central Asia. The lengths of this large, padded garment are crossed over in a V and one lapel is attached at the side. This ceremonial chapan, which belonged to statesman Kazibek Bi Keldibekuly (1667–1764), native of Yedrey (Qaraghandy region), is embellished with trimmings embroidered in gold thread. It is decorated with foliage motifs symbolising prosperity and abundance, as was common at that time. These elaborate *chapan* were worn for special occasions such as official meetings, visits, council meetings and commemorations.

Exhibition

Scientific direction

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Aura Studio

lighting design

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film production

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sound design

Realization

Florence Guionneau-Joie / ArtExpo

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Cottel

audiovisual installation

Transpalux

lighting

Exhibit

signage

Aïnu

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Practical information

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The Musée Guimet is open every day
except Tuesday, from 10am to 6pm.

Closed on 25 December, 1st January and 1st May.

Single ticket for permanent collections and
temporary exhibitions: €13 (full), €10 (reduced).

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