



Greco-Scythian metalworking

Summary :

The emergence and the remarkable evolution of Scythian decorative and applied art is illustrated by a great variety of important works with their own peculiar features in the style and subjects in each period. Their manufacture and use were influenced by several factors connected to the social structures and practices of the Scythians, whose contacts with the Greeks and other ethnic groups were intensified in time through the gradual establishment of an extensive network of contacts and trade affairs. Metalwork is a striking example of these processes; it includes masterpieces executed in various techniques and manners, which reveal a blend of local artistic tradition and borrowed forms.

Date

7th - early 3rd c. B.C.

1. The Greek-Scythian metalworking

The lasting artistic value of Scythian antiquities is due to the great variety of superb works of decorative and applied art which belong to different trends and schools. Of special interest are the masterpieces of ancient relief metalwork with Scythian motifs and objects in the Graeco-Barbarian style manufactured in the [Greek colonies](#) on the shores of the Pontus Euxinus (Black Sea). Noteworthy are the extremely rare works of art brought by the [Scythians](#) from Greece and Asia Minor, as well as some artefacts executed in the mixed Urartian-Scythian style or in the Oriental-Hellenic manner.

2. Scythian society and art

The distinctive features of the art and culture of the Scythians were determined by their nomadic way of life. The Scythians demonstrated particularly remarkable craftsmanship in the minor arts, producing fine bone carvings, bronzes cast by the [cire perdue](#) (lost wax) method and [repoussé technique](#) works in gold and silver.¹

The emergence of these decorative arts was connected with the class differentiation in Scythian society, a process which began in the 7th c. B.C. As nomads frequently engaged in military clashes, the Scythian ruling class best achieved these aims through gold and silver ornaments worn on ceremonial and ritual garments, richly ornamented weapons, horse attire, toilet articles, and ritual utensils. The objects were decorated with animal figures or scenes of fighting beasts rendered in a distinctive vivid manner usually called "the Scythian animal style".²

Scythian art, like Scythian culture in its entirety, may be divided into three periods: early Scythian or archaic (7th and 6th c. B.C.), middle Scythian (5th and 4th c. B.C.) and late Scythian (late 4th - early 3rd c. B.C.). Each period had its own peculiar features in style and subjects.

3.1. Early Scythian or Archaic period (7th - 6th c. B.C.)

In the archaic period the animal style seemed to be a natural blend of the unique Scythian artistic tradition and certain borrowed forms, mostly of ancient Oriental origin. The most favoured subjects were heads of beasts, felines, ibexes, birds, rams, flying rams with the beak of a bird of prey, [griffins](#), and horses. One of the most representative specimens of the animal style is a golden plaque chased in high relief found in the Kostromskaya [barrow](#), showing a recumbent stag with its legs drawn up under its body, used evidently as a shield emblem by a Scythian chieftain. The themes presented in the artefacts of the late 7th and early 6th c. B.C. Melgunov (or Litoi) and [Kelermes](#) barrows are also representative of the early Scythian period.³ A fusion of Scythian, Oriental and Greek-Oriental styles is predominant. The gold panther plaque, the two nesting bowls, a battle-axe and a sword show both a traditional Scythian style in an interesting adaptation of the Assyro-Urartian style and the new influence of the Graeco-Oriental style. The Graeco-Oriental school of metalwork is clearly visible in the artistic treatment of a round silver mirror with ornamental and figurative motifs around a winged female figure, [Cybele](#), the Great Goddess of Asia Minor and the Mistress of Animals. The influence of Greek culture on the Scythian world was especially pronounced after the nomads' expeditions into Asia Minor and particularly shortly before and after the



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foundation of the first [Greek \(Ionian\) colonies](#) in the [Kerch](#) Strait and along the Black Sea coast in the first half of the 6th c. B.C.⁴

Trade contacts with Greek merchants prior to the establishment of their colonies on the Black Sea coast are clearly illustrated by the material from the Temir-Gora barrow near the modern town of Kerch which shows the traditional Scythian animal style on the head of a bird of prey, and a painted Rhodian-Ionian [terracotta](#) vessel ([oenochoe](#)).

After the foundation of the colonies on the coastal area of the Black Sea in the 6th c. B.C., metal or clay items were exported to the remote areas of Scythia by ship, via the rivers Dniester, Dnieper, Bug, Don and [Kuban](#) and their tributaries. Greek merchants also used the land routes which ran from [Olbia](#) across the vast territory of Scythia to the East. It is likely that the unique masterpieces of antique toreutics from the Martonoshy and Annovka barrows in Ukraine reached the Scythian territory via the Greek colony of Olbia.⁵

In the second half of the 6th c. B.C. a large number of workshops catering to the tastes and demands of the barbarian aristocracy emerged in Olbia, [Panticapaeum](#) and other coastal Greek towns.

3.2. Middle and Late Scythian periods (5th - early 3rd c. B.C.)

The 5th century B.C. (Middle Scythian period) saw substantial changes in Scythian art. These were reflected both in the choice of animal motifs and in the manner of their execution. The emergence of new forms occurred under the steadily increasing impact of Greek art and the simultaneously declining influence of West Asian and particularly Assyrian-Urartian art as reflected in the Zhurovka and Ak-Mechet barrows. The introduction of the so-called 'zoomorphic transformations' led to the disappearance of subjects like horses, ibexes, rams and ram-birds and the introduction of new motifs, both local and borrowed like lions, wolves, wild boars and hares alongside with fantastic creatures such as griffins', eagles' or lions' heads.⁶

From the mid-5th c. B.C. onwards, the influence of classical [Hellenic art](#) on the Scythian animal style increased substantially owing to the more extensive use of Greek wares by the Scythian nobility, especially those who lived in the vicinity of the Bosporan cities. This is confirmed by the excavations of the famous [Seven Brothers](#) barrows on the Taman peninsula and the Scythian barrows of the ancient necropolis of [Nymphaeum](#), near Kerch. The finds include richly decorated weapons, torques and bronze adornments of Scythian horse harnesses as well as various objects, some of high artistic value, imported to the Bosporan centres from Greece, Etruria, Asia Minor and other areas. Vessels made of precious metals, silver and gold [rhytons](#) with finials in the form of sculptured half-figures or heads of animals were obviously imported from Achaemenid Persia. Very rare silver-gilted Attic bowls and [kylikes](#) with exquisite engravings based on Greek mythological or literary subjects (e.g. the story of Odysseus and Penelope) were also found. The barrows yielded wonderful bronze artifacts from the Greek centres in Italy (Magna Graecia). A red-figure vessel, a [skyphos](#), depicting a standing woman clad in a tunic and mantle was undoubtedly painted by a skilful Athenian craftsman around mid 5th c. B.C.

One of the workshops of Magna Graecia, most likely in the town of Locri, a renowned metalworking centre, produced the marvellous figurine of an athlete designed to crown a bronze candelabrum in the form of tripod. The depiction of triumphant athletes, winners in sports competitions, was a leading theme in Greek art of the 5th c. B.C. The miniature from Nymphaeum is an outstanding specimen of the so-called 'austere style'; it imitates a statue of the great Greek sculptor Polykleitos. A well-preserved Panathenaic amphora was found in the grave of a Maeotian chieftain in the Yelizavetinskaya barrow. Vessels of this type were given as awards to the winners of athletic events held in Athens once every four years in honour of Pallas Athena, patron goddess of the city.⁷

All these artefacts testify to the great wealth of the Sindo-Maeotian and Scythian chieftains and to their extensive trade and cultural contacts with the Greek centres on the coastal areas of the Black Sea in the 5th and 4th c. B.C. It explains the steadily growing influence of classical art on the local tradition and, in particular, on the development of the Scythian animal style in the 5th c. B.C.

In the 4th c. B.C. the Scythian kingdom reached its prime and its contacts with the Greek colonies along the northern coastal area of the Black Sea greatly intensified. The centre of Scythian art then shifted to the [Bosporan kingdom](#) and especially to its capital Panticapaeum. As the import of Bosporan works of art attained mass scale, the Graeco-Scythian style, which had been remarkable in



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the previous epoch, acquired a completely new tinge.

The 4th c. B.C. royal barrows and the sepulchres of the Hellenized Scythian upper classes (Kul-Oba, Solokha, Chertomlyk, Tolstaya Mogila, Talayev, Bolshaya Bliznitsa, Karagodeuashkh, Anapkurgan)⁸ have yielded a great number of artefacts dating from this golden age of Scythian art. Among these countless objects one can see items of different origin: articles of Scythian workmanship are found side by side with purely Hellenic works as well as with objects made by Greek craftsmen in accordance with Scythian tradition. These artifacts of the mixed Graeco-Barbarian style are usually exceptionally ingenious. Executed in the classical forms of Greek realism, they were fully compliant to the tastes and demands of the Scythian nobility.

The long-lasting contacts of the Scythians with the Bosporan Greeks brought about one more phenomenon in art, the famous metalwork of the northern Pontic Greeks, articles which depict the Scythians, their life, clothing, weapons and horse harnesses. The subject matter of these works reflects the daily life of the Scythians, their battles, rituals and customs, and events from their heroic epics.⁹

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Glossary :

	cire perdue (lost wax), the
Sculptural technique of metal casting. A model in plaster or clay coated with wax is covered with a perforated plaster or clay mold. When the body is heated, the wax which covers the mold is "lost" and its space is taken by molten metal which, after it cools and the core is removed, gives the final product.	
	griffin, the
A legendary creature of eastern provenance with the head, talons, and wings of an eagle and the body of a lion.	
	kylix, the
The most essential ancient drinking cup. It bears a wide and shallow body raised on a stem from a foot. It always has horizontal handles disposed symmetrically, often swinging upwards. The interior, flat, round bottom of the vessel was used as surface for painted decoration. There are many different types of kylikes such as the Komast type, the Siana type, types A, B, C, the Droop and the Cassel cups.	
	oenochoe
From the greek words "οἶνος" (wine) and "χέω" (pour). Ovoid, single-handled wine jug usually taller than it is wide. There have been distinguished 10 types based on variations of profile, mouth type and handle form.	
	repoussé technique, the
The process or the result of decorating a. metallic surfaces with designs in relief, hammered out on the surface of the material from the back to the front. b. ceramic objects, where the motif is impressed into the surface of the vessel (the fresh clay) before firing.	
	rhyton, the
libation vessel with an outlet at the bottom of the vessel allowing the slow outflow of the liquid.	
	skyphos
A deep vessel with an open rim and an almost hemispherical shape.	