

HSIUNG-NU ART

Overview Examples of Hsiung-nu art come almost exclusively from archaeological excavations of Hsiung-nu burials. As a result, our knowledge of Hsiung-nu art is restricted to works produced for the Hsiung-nu elite and made from materials (metals) that can survive for centuries buried in the earth.

Objects and Stylistic Features

The vast majority of Hsiung-nu art has survived in the form of metal belt plaques, or metal appliqué ornaments; jewelry with artistic motifs has survived in more limited quantities. Hsiung-nu art shows many links with the art of other steppe peoples, and shows little variation over time, but a much greater variation between locations. Although Hsiung-nu art is quite distinctive from the art of neighboring cultures in northeast China and south-central Inner Mongolia, it appears to have originated in the Pazyryk cultural sphere of the Altai Mountains and also shows many similarities with Scythian art.

The similarities with Scythian art can be seen in both the depiction of humans and animals, but also in the iconography. Hsiung-nu art includes all the elements of the “Scythian triad” – the deer, the tiger and the head of a bird of prey – as well as some depictions of humans. Nonetheless, Hsiung-nu does have its own unique characteristics that distinguish it from Scythian works. For example, later Scythian art frequently depicts winged, horned horses but images of such horses are never found in Hsiung-nu art. Animal predation is a common image in Scythian art, but the uniquely Hsiung-nu version of this theme is that of a tiger carrying dead prey. The heads of birds of prey are frequently used images in both Scythian and Hsiung-nu art, but the Hsiung-nu bird heads have more moderately sized beaks and eyes, and have ears.

The significance of the imagery in Hsiung-nu art is uncertain, but there appear to be three distinct sets of iconography: mythical-religious, socio-political, and mythical-historical, although this last category is less certain. In this interpretation of Hsiung-nu iconography animal predation scenes that represent the triumph of life over death make up the mythical-religious category. Depictions of same-animal combat make up the socio-political category, representing struggles for power. The final category, mythical-historical consists of images of human beings, however the interpretation of these scenes combat and wrestling remains highly speculative.

Readings

Chernykh, Evgenij N. “Chapter 23 – The ‘Huns’ in the East”, *Nomadic Cultures in the Mega-Structure of the Eurasian World*. Brighton, MA, 2017; pp. 344-366.

Psarras, Sophia-Karin. “Xiongnu Culture: Identification and Dating”, *Central Asiatic Journal*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (1995), pp. 102-136.

_____. “Han and Xiongnu: A Reexamination of Cultural and Political Relations (I)”, *Monumenta Serica* 51 (2003), pp. 55-236.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the difficulties in the interpretation of Hsiung-nu art?
2. What sources could help in deciphering the imagery of Hsiung-nu art?