

## **Ancient gold of Kazakhstan**

**Gold is one of the first materials to have been mastered by man. Its malleability, resistance to corrosion and beautiful yellow color have made it one of the main materials in the jeweler's art.**

Gold is a warm metal. Its color and dull surface create an impression of latent solar energy. Thousands of years have passed since man became aware of gold. Tribes and people have appeared and passed away, different trends in art have replaced one another and yet people have always seen the reflection of the sun's rays, sunrises and sunsets in the glitter of gold artefacts. Gold and its color were also associated with fire. Such perception is universal and is known everywhere. Gold has certain positive associations, as in expressions "hands of gold", "a heart of gold", "such-and-such a person is pure gold". Such idioms exist in many languages.

Since this precious metal is imperishable, gold works of art have come down to us from the very depth of history in their original form.

The abundance of ancient gold objects recovered on the territory of Kazakhstan shows that gold had been mined here since antique times. Ancient gold mines have been found in Eastern, Northern and Central Kazakhstan and in Semirechye. It should be noted, however, that certain Kazakh objects may have been imported or made from gold acquired by barter and trade with Eastern Turkestan, Middle Asia. The oldest objects illustrated are ornaments of Andronovo Bronze Age culture and testify to the emergence of the jeweler's art in Kazakhstan as far back as in the sixteen to fourteen centuries B.C. they are not numerous and were mainly found in relatively rich graves. It is thus possible to say that the possession of gold objects indicated a definite position in society. It is known that with the Indo-Iranians already gold ornaments indicated membership of a caste (varna, pishtra) of warrior nobles and with the formation of the states – of the king's family. Incidentally, the Indian term "varna", like the Iranian "pishtra" means "color". Apart from gold ornaments, red of the warriors' clothes was also considered to be a sign of caste

membership. Experts believe this kind of symbolism to have existed as far back as the Bronze Age.

Among Andronovo ornaments, the most frequent are earrings in the form of rings with closed ends. They were made of copper wire. The copper was covered with gold leaf and polished with chamois. This technique made it possible to economize in the precious metal and was also applied in early nomadic art.

So-called earrings with a socket are found in Kazakhstan burial complexes, one end being narrower, and the other flared. Such earrings were widespread and not found solely in Andronovo burial grounds. They have been discovered among the archaeological remains of other Bronze Age cultures in the Middle Age and Siberia.

Earrings and pendants consisting of one and a half turns tolled out of concave strips and are also widely represented in Andronovo culture and may be regarded as its archaeological symbol. Objects of pure gold are rare. Copper covered with leaf gold predominates. Earrings of this type are simple and not decorated. Some of gold objects –plaques from sheaths and scabbards, pins, strips are engraved with geometrical patterns: the wavy lines and triangular scallops typical of Andronovo ceramics.

Highly unusual is a bracelet of gold tube from the rich Alakul burial ground of Aibas-darasi (Central Kazakhstan). Only two pieces have survived – thick, slightly flattened tubes of gold leaf. One of the tubes has a cast cylindrical socket soldered on to it and is engraved with latch triangles. The opposite end of this link of the bracelet has the same ornament. The other piece of the bracelet is not so massive and is devoid of ornamentation. No doubt, this bracelet is prototype of the opening torques, which were spread later to the Scyth-Sak world of Eurasia. One example is the torque from the Issyk Kurgan (5<sup>th</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.)

Two earrings unearthed in 1980 in the Munshunkur burial ground in Eastern Semirechye date back to the Karasuk culture, Central Asian in origin. One of them, covered with: leaf gold, in no way differs from Andronovo circular earrings. The other, cast in a special form has a “male-female” fastening. Inside the ring, there

are two figurines of horses, one standing behind the other. The representation is schematic and stylized: an exaggerated neck with a mane divided into locks a long, somewhat drooping muzzle and round eyes. The designs were probably carved on a soft stone mold for casting and not hammered afterwards. Stylistically, they were similar to the horses on the pommel of the bronze dagger (Seiminsko-Turbinksaya culture of Prikamye and Privolzhye of Karasuk origin), as well as to many zoomorphic designs of the Karasuk culture in Zabaikalye. This treatment of horses has been known since the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium B.C. in the Near East (“kerku” type seals) and continued into the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> millennia B.C. (Luristan, Zagros and others).

The earring from Semirechye most likely dates back to the same pre-Saks period – twelfth-tenth centuries B.C., like most of the “reindeer stones” (stelae). It should be mentioned that “reindeer” pictures have been found in Southern Kazakhstan (Karatau, Aksu-Dzhabagly, Dzhungar Alatau). From the many data, it may be concluded that the “reindeer stone” of Bronze Age art was taken up by the art of the Saks, leaving an imprint on the distinctive features of the early work. Near-Eastern analogies on this earring testify to the western contacts of the Karasuk and relative cultures. The earring from Semirechye is so far the only example of the Karasuk Animal style executed in gold. It may possible play a role in revealing the sources of the Scytho-Saks Animal Style. Two horses motif later passes through the whole art history of the Scytho-Sak and many other Indo-Iranian ethnic groups. It existed in the Middle Ages and after, always featuring solar symbolism and connected with the cult of the Divine Twins.

According to archaeological data, the jeweler’s craft grew up on the territory of Kazakhstan in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium B.C. The superior workmanship of the bracelet from Central Kazakhstan and the earring from Semirechye show that the art had made considerable progress by that time. Today, the emergence of the brilliant Scytho-Siberian animal style in Eurasia does not seem surprising. It continues to amaze and delight the experts with such new finds as the burial of the man in “gold clothes” from the Issyk Kurgan, the pectoral from the Tolstaya

Mogila in the Ukraine and the treasures from the Kushan kings from Tell-Tepe in Afghanistan.

The Scytho-Siberian animal style is the most striking phenomenon in the history of art, Sak tribes having played the main role in the development of this style in Asia. Many of the remains of the Saks culture recovered in the 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries from “Chudskiye graves” in Western Siberia are now known as the Siberian Collection of Peter I. they were first brought to the Kunstkammer and then transferred to the State Hermitage. By analogy with classified and dated articles of applied art, they are regarded as artistic monuments of the early nomads, a collective term covering not only the Saks, but the Yuechzhi, Sauromatians, Ussuni, Huns and Sarmatians. The political stability of the Saks, Sauromatian and Scythian alliances in the 7<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries B.C. resulted in the gold age of the Scytho-Siberian animal style. The triad of zoomorphic images (bird, hoofed animal, beast of prey) which had been already used in early Saks art, reflected the identity of the universe and society.

Early Saks art is represented mainly by bronze objects recovered from the Tagisken, Uigarak, Bizhe and Arzhan Kurgans in Kazakhstan. They show close links with Luristan toreutics, the remains of the Karasuk and Tagar cultures, as well as in some respects, with the pre-Saks petroglyphs of Semirechye, Altai and Mongolia. There are mainly cast objects, considerably different from those done in profile or in low relief from gold.

Of much interest are the plaques from a sheath found in Central Kazakhstan with a hammered representation of four panthers. In style, they resemble a number of other designs on the remains found on the territory from China and Mongolia to the Black Sea coastal area. The plaque depicts panthers curled up into a ball, with enlarged heads, round eyes and ears, their paws and tail ending in tiny rings. Outlines in general are rounded. These plaques can be dated to the 6<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.

A large complex of gold ornaments was unearthed by S.Chernikov while excavating wealthy kurgans of the 7<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C. in Chiliktinskaya Valley (Eastern Kazakhstan). The complex consists, in the main, of clothing and weapon

ornaments. The Chilikta finds were mostly gold applique works skillfully cut out of foil (boars “on points” and diamond-shaped buckles). They had been glued on to cloth or wood. The boars are of different sizes but treated in the same manner. The outlines are extremely austere. These designs resemble certain specimens of rock drawings and even Paleolithic paintings. The drop-shaped eye and triangular tusk have been cut out. The Chilikta finds prove the existence of established and highly expressive images and ornamental motifs in that early period.

The buckles in the form of a recumbent stag are most remarkable. They were also glued on to cloth and leather, as they are not pieced for sewing. It should be noted that the stags’ ears were made separately and filled in with stones and paste encrustation. A tendency to use different colors is already evident in the Chilikta artefacts. In the treatment of antlers, the stags are reminiscent of “reindeer stones”. The image of the noble stags known from Neolithic remains of the people of Kazakhstan, Siberia, Central and Near Asia (since the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium B.C.). In this connection it can be said that in Saks art the local tradition has been organically combined with Near-Eastern borrowings in the treatment of the stag.

On the whole, in the Scytho-Saks world the gold stag was the symbol of the sun, rebirth and death cycle in nature and its antlers were shoots of the Tree of Life.

The griffin-shaped buckle and the buckle in the form of a panther curled up in a ring from the Chilikta collection have numerous analogies in developed Scythian art, whereas the representation of the fish is the symbol of water and fertility – with the fins treated in the shape of drops is unique.

As a whole, the Chilikta zoomorphic images conform to the division of the world known in different mythologies: a bird-top, the sky, animals and beasts of prey – middle, the earth, fish-bottom, and water. With the formation of states, the Saks gave this symbolism a different meaning: it began to signify power.

A typical example of this is a three-tier composition on the headdress of the “gold man”, whose grave was excavated in the Issyk kurgan near Almaty. It had not been touched, enabling us to define the regalia and symbols of power among the ancient nomads. The Issyk kurgan is a single monument of its kind. The “Issyk Cheiftain”

was buried in gala or ritual attire. He wore a thin, evidently silk shirt, a short coat (kamzol) and narrow breeches of red suede and high boots without heels. His heavy belt was composed of cast plaques in the shape of a fantastic stag and elks' heads. On this head, the chieftain wore a high conical three-sided hat (kulakh). It is exactly in such hats that the noble Saks-tigrakhaudy (literally – “in hats with pointed tops”) are depicted in relief on the staircase in Persepolis. Round his neck he has a gold torque with three loops, its ends fashioned in the form of tigers' heads. On the fingers of his right hand were two rings: one was with a mirror, the other was with a portrait in profile of a man in a radiate crown. Near the left shoulder of the deceased lay a symbolic staff with a gold knob and a whip wound with a gold band. On the other right, fastened to a belt, in the red wooden sheath was a sword of the type used by warriors fighting on horseback; on the left, was an iron dagger in the sheath with plaques in the form of an elk and a horse. Its pommel in the shape of twin-headed griffin is overlaid with gold leaf and the blade is encrusted with plaques depicting various wild animals. The pattern of the weapons permits us to date the Issyk Kurgan to the Saks period – the 5<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries B.C.

The excellent state of preservation made it possible to undertake a sufficiently trustworthy reconstruction of the chieftain's dress. The entire coat (kamzol) was covered with sewed on buckles in the form of trefoils and tiger's heads, thus creating an imitation of a protective hauberk. The buckles were cut out of gold foil and sewed or glued on to the red suede as applique work. Their rhythmical alternation against the red background of the coat and high boots created an open work effect. The headgear was decorated with buckles in the shape of leopards, tigers, sculptured figures of horned and winged horses, birds, an ibex, (arkhar) (on the top of the hat) plaques depicting a mountain with “The tree of life”, arrow-shaped plaques: others in the form of birds' wings.

Gold ornaments from the Issyk kurgan were made by various techniques: hammering, stamping, engraving, soldering, cold gilding, polishing, granulation, paste and tar encrustation, coloring, etc.

The majority of the large Issyk buckles in the form of animals are executed in low relief. Eyes, ribs and muscles are shown with engraved dot and comma markings, ovals, brackets and incised symbolic lines, as on the flattened reliefs and line pictures of Assyria and Achaemenid Iran. The animals are stylized and the treatment is decorative. The Issyk craftsmen preferred expressive profiles with intentionally distorted figures. The bodies of “snarling” leopards, tiger griffins (buckles on headgear), an elk and a horse (plaques from a dagger) are twisted and express the agony of death. These unusual representations of animals are possibly connected with the ancient Mesopotamian treatment of a feline beast of prey (a lion) shown in combat against a hero or God, familiar from such scenes on the cylinder seals.

The encrustations on the dagger are skillfully executed. The blood grooves are overlaid with gold plaques depicting boars, leopards (tigers), hares, goats, wolves, saigas, goitred gazelle, arkhar, foxes and snakes following one another. They are executed in what are called “clawing” poses, recalling monuments of the nomads. Here, evidently, we have new Saks interpretation of the “animal copulation” compositions characteristic of the Middle Eastern and ancient arts. The pictures are also so tiny that the craftsmen emphasized certain visual features, exaggerating eyes, horns, ears, hooves and claws. To stress the rhythm of the composition, the convex parts of the body were emphasized with color - drop-shaped insets of cornelian and paste were stuck with tar through cuts in the shoulder blades and hindquarters.

In the Issyk kurgan, the animal figurines executed in round sculpture (winged and horned horses, birds, the arkhar on the hat, the heads of big-eared griffins on the pommel of the dagger), as compared with those made in relief are very lifelike.

Gold adornments painted red and black were found at Issyk; these are long arrow-shaped plaques for headgear and an earring with clusters of coarse granulation, minute cylinders and turquoise beads.

The Saks complex of the Issyk kurgan illustrates a mature, highly original art well worthy of the highest appreciation. It should be stressed out that some of the finds

are not unique for Semirechye. In many other burial grounds for example, the Issyk and Talgar (most of them had been plundered) gold objects were found similar to those recovered in the Issyk Kurgan or adding to our knowledge of the art of the Saks in Semirechye.

These include, above all, earrings of twisted gold wire with pendants of clustered granulations, cylinders and beads of paste, turquoise, cornelian and chalcedony; a pin with the head in the shape of a tiger-griffin in its death agony; an iron buckle covered by a gold plaque with an interlaced design. All these objects were found in rich “royal graves”.

In the 3<sup>rd</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> centuries B.C. the animal style was replaced by the encrustation style. Colored insets used rather moderately and delicately in the animal style began to come widespread. Gold objects executed in the encrustation style were recovered from three burial complexes in Kazakhstan. They are dated in general to the 3<sup>rd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> centuries B.C.: these are decorative buckles for clothes from the Tenlik Kurgan (3<sup>rd</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> B.C.), two bracelets from the Tuzdak locality, Karmakchinsky district, Kyzylorda Region and priestess's ornament from the Kargaly Valley in Semirechye (2<sup>nd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> centuries B.C.).

The most interesting of the finds from Tenlik is a number of trapezoidal plaques, evidently ornaments for clothes with a picture of horseman. He is dressed in Saks costume with a soft high conical hat and his cloak flying behind his back. The horse has a clipped mane with plumage and the knees are bent. All the horse's trappings are shown. The sources of the picture are not clear. Such designs have been known in the Near East and Asia Minor since the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium B.C. As to style, the buckles from Tenlik recall pictures on the artefacts from the Siberian Collection of Peter I (genre compositions), from the Pazyryk kurgan V (carpet) and representations of Graeco-Bactrian art. On the whole, the horseman was characteristic of Late Hellenic art, the cult of the divine hero always being associated with it.

Other buckles from the Tenlik kurgan, cut out of foil, or stamped and pieced for sewing, feature plant motifs: trefoils, rosettes, lotus buds, shoots. Of particular



interest is the motif of a “twining grape-vine” with flowers reminiscent of the decorative motifs of Hellenic art: Graeco-Bactrian, Indo-Greek and Parthian. The ornamentation of many of the objects from Tenlik is particularly reminiscent of the remains from the Berel, Shibe and Kotandy kurgans in the Altai, according to recent data of the same time as Pazyry and also of the Hellenic art of Central Asia. Some of the objects are close to those of Issyk, especially the ones painted in black and red.

The Tuzdak bracelet may date back to the same period as the Tenlik objects. One of them is an unnaturally elongated cast figure of a fantastic wolf with a “garland” of a griffin’s heads on the back. This bracelet has analogies with relics from Amu-Darya Hoard and the Siberian Collection of Peter I and is dated at not earlier than the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. on the second bracelet, which is hinged, there are pictures of two horses with twisted bodies. Round and triangular settings are filled with colored stones. Similar articles of the Hun-Sarmatian period are also available in the Siberian Collection of Peter I and they also occur among single finds of the Early Kushan period. The most remarkable complex of objects executed in the encrustation style was found in the Kargaly valley near Almaty in 1939. The data have been repeatedly published and interpreted both in our country and abroad. In our view, the description of the complex made by A.N.Bernshtam is the most correct.

A.N.Bernshtam thought that the complex in Karagaly was the burial of Ussuni priestess (shamanka). He explained the representations of so-called “Karagalin diadem” on the basis of the Turko-Mongolian mythology and epic. In his opinion, the design of the diadem is a combination of the original local, Hun and Graeco-Bactrian artistic trends, which went to make the distinctive features of Ussuni art. According to another version, the composition of the diadem reflects Dao beliefs of ancient Iranian myths.

On the diadem, alongside images and motifs typical of Chinese art (dragons, the Mountain of the World, a band of clouds), there are representations recalling Saks motifs (tiger-griffins, a boar, a goat). M.Rostovtsev, Karlgren and Laufer proved in

their time that Chinese art during Chan (the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C.) and early Han (2<sup>nd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> centuries B.C.) periods were strongly influenced by the Hellenes and the Nomads which resulted in widespread use of the motifs and images of their art. In this connection, we may suppose that Kargaly diadem (only two parts of it are preserved) was made by a local craftsman in the traditions of Han art.

By analogy with the remains of the Han art from the Lu collection, A.N. Bernshtam dated Kargaly complex at the 1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries. The composition of the diadem, however, has parallels dating back to before 1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, for example, the finds in Taksil and relics from the Siberian Collection of Peter I that date back to the 2<sup>nd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> centuries. The Kargaly complex as a whole can therefore be given an earlier dating than that suggested by A.N. Bernshtam, that is between the 2<sup>nd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> centuries B.C.

Other ornaments from Kargalinsky Hoard include buckles in the shape of winged goats, shaped plaques etc, and have parallels in developed Saks art, particularly among landscape compositions from the Siberian Collections of Peter I and the individual objects from the Aral Sea area.

The encrustation style, whose development was to some extent stimulated by the Central Asian connections of the Saks, paved the way for the spread of the Polychrome style in the art of the people who inhabited Kazakhstan. This style began to be spread here in the 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries. Among the remains of the Polychrome Style, two groups are to be distinguished: first group – insets of colored (red, orange) stones in soldered on mountings, granulated ornaments, filigree band etc.; second group – cloisonné encrustation, the entire surface being covered with stone insets and no ground visible.

The first group of objects, in which Hun traditions predominate, includes diadems, kolts, rings, earrings, belt ends, buckles, etc., the second group – articles with cloisonné encrustation: bracelets, buckles, sheaths, plaques from sword hafts, gag-bits.

The number of articles in the Polychrome Style found on the territory of Kazakhstan is growing every year and now approaching that of the Black Sea

coast. There are already more than ten kolts (temple pendants), the most typical examples of this style in Kazakhstan and neighboring Kyrgyzstan.

Imported polychrome artefacts were found in Sarmatian Lebedevka burial, which was excavated recently. Among the finds were Early-Roman imported objects – glass goblets, etc. a number of round gilded buckles – round plaques with a boss in the center and with cloisonné and plant ornament, also decorative bands in the form of “rope” and representations of heads of birds and goats – made, perhaps, by craftsmen of the Middle East in XII-XIV centuries. A massive ring, recovered from Lebedevka with dark-cherry almandine insets in soldered-on mountings, edged with melted granulations was evidently made in the Black Sea coast or in Central Asia.

A great many miscellaneous polychrome articles were accidentally discovered in 1928 in a burial near Lake Borovoye. A.N. Bernshtam and I.P. Zasetzkaya published the descriptions. They include buckles, buttons, plaques from sheaths and richly granulated medallions with stones in cloisonné or soldered-on settings. Semiprecious stones (garnet, cornelian) in the form of hemisphere or flat seal were fixed in with tar.

Of special note is a silver torque with an end like a horned dragon's head with round garnet insets and decorated with triangles and clusters of melted granulations from a burial in the Kara-Agach valley in the former Akmolisnky uyezd (excavated by Kozyerv, 1904).

The finds from Semirechye are represented by a series of earrings and kolts. The kolts from Aktasy burial ground are magnificent; they are decorated with tiny triangles and circular inlays of dark-cherry garnet, minute pyramids of granulation of the tubular rays of the disk. They were found in the burial of a noble woman of Late Ussuni period (3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries) in the Kuraily Valley, Kengesky District, Almaty Region and is the best example of the kolts made in Polychrome Style of Hun period.

More modest kolts of this kind with insets of colored paste were found in one of the graves of Kok-Mardan burial ground near a settlement of the Kanguy period in

Otrar Oasis (Shymkent region). Also discovered here were polychrome objects made of copper with insets of glass and paste, testifying to the fact that this style had influenced the development of the jeweler's art near Syrdarya towns in the Early Middle Ages. In Kzyl-Kainar Tobe settlement, a torque, a gold cord and earrings were found. These finds permit us to believe that certain towns in Central Asia were centers for the production of polychromic jewelry.

A collection of gold objects, some executed in the Polychrome Style was discovered by accident in 1915 in a cave on the eastern shore of Lake Batyr in the Mangyshlak Region. The finds include a miniature flask and a cup. Ring-shaped tabs are soldered on to the body of the flask and its cylindrical lid. Its surface is decorated with bands of imitation granulation and filigree. The cup is cylindrical in form and on its surface there are thin horizontal lines left after lathe treatment under pressure. Convex gold plaques with a tiny loop on the reverse are sewed on the external side of a linen head band covered with red silk. Among the finds executed in the Polychrome Style near the Lake Batyr are the pommel of a sword or a dagger in the form of a rock crystal hemisphere in a cruciform gold surround decorated with almandine and colored glass stones in soldered settings and also a pair of earrings. Each consists of a ring with a bow-shaped element hinged to the ring, a square and two drop-shaped plates with garnet insets and four pendants of pearls, corals and gold beads. Relying on numerous analogies with artefacts from the Bosphorus and the Caucasus, the batyr collection has been dated by K.M.Skalon at the 3<sup>rd</sup> century.

The art of the late nomads is represented in the Album by a small collection of gold objects from Semirechye. A wealthy medieval burial was discovered by chance, in the spring of 1980, during excavations on the outskirts of Chingeldy settlement in Almaty region. The burial had been destroyed and only some of the relics had survived. The large gold open-work belt buckles were found in the form of "mystic knot" with oval clips for hanging up. The buckles are stamped and engraved. They are hollow and composed of two parts soldered together, giving an illusion of solidity. On the reverse there are two loops for fastening. In addition to

these buckles, the belt was decorated with small plaques in the form of a rosette with fasteners. Another find was a schematic representation of a dragon cut out of golden leaf. There was also a bowl made of an alloy of silver and gold with a shaped horizontal handle engraved with lotus flowers, a twining grapevine, clouds and other objects. The bowl is likely to have been beaten out on a shaped wooden block. The finds from Chingeldy almost certainly date back to the late 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries.

These objects are only part of the ancient gold of Kazakhstan, but they give some idea of the great contribution to the treasury of the world's art made by the tribes and people who once inhabited Kazakhstan. Extensive archaeological research carried out in the republic every year brings new discoveries and therefore, there is every prospect that the collection will continue to grow in future.