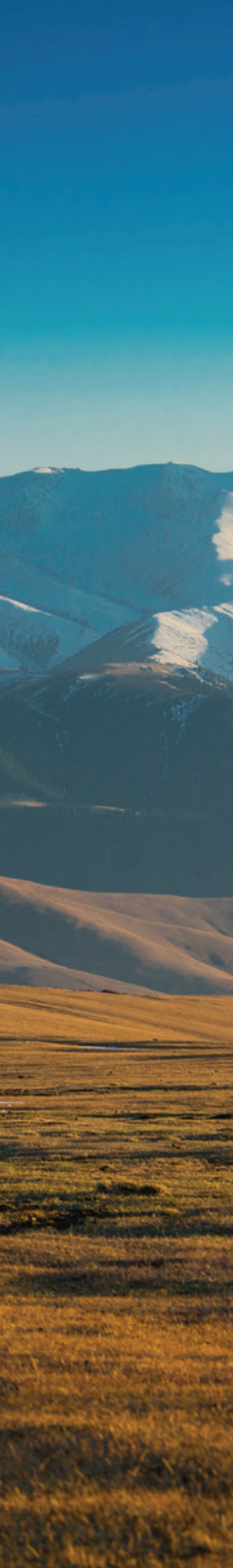




Nomadic cultures of Central Eurasia lived in rugged frontier landscapes. Photograph by Aureliy. OPPOSITE: Bronze ornaments collected by the Mayers. PM object 41-37-57 (top) and 41-37-3 (bottom).



CHINESE NOMADIC ART AND THE JOURNEY TO COLLECT

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The Legacy of the Mayer Collection

By Fangyi Cheng

For foreigners in China, the 1920s and '30s were the golden age for collecting artifacts. Professional curators and dealers sent by foundations or governments stayed in Beijing, Tianjin, and other big cities to search for Chinese antiquities or to do fieldwork. Others were amateur collectors of more modest personal means.





William Mayer (1892–1975) and his wife Isabel (1902–1988), *née* Ingram, were in the second category. Although they were not professionally involved in the antiquities market, they managed to assemble a significant collection of bronze art produced by the nomadic cultures of China’s northern frontier. Despite its cultural importance, their collection of over 400 objects has attracted very little attention since its purchase by the Penn Museum in 1941. Their contributions to Penn’s collections aside, the Mayers’ personal histories are also fascinating.

Early Years in Beijing and Philadelphia

Isabel Ingram was born in Beijing in 1902, where she grew up as the daughter of an American Congregational missionary, James Henry Ingram. She attended Wellesley College, but went back to Beijing after graduating in 1922, taking over from her sister the role of tutor to Empress Wanrong, wife of the last Manchu Emperor. The Emperor, Aisin Gioro Puyi of the Qing Dynasty, abdicated in 1912, but had retained his title and residency, courtesy of the government of the Republic of China.

Living inside the Forbidden City gave Ingram connections with curators, scholars, and explorers passing through China, especially with the help of her sociable colleague, Reginald Johnston, who was the tutor of Emperor Puyi. On a court visit in 1924, Ingram met the distinguished Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore and Chinese poets Xu Zhimo and Lin Huiyin. That same year, Puyi and Wanrong were expelled from the Forbidden City, and Ingram’s career as the imperial tutor ended.

Ingram went back to America to serve as an assistant to Dr. Horace H.F. Jayne, the Curator of Oriental Art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA), whom she had met in Beijing. In 1928, she traveled to China and Japan to purchase major architectural collections for the PMA. In 1929, Jayne became Director of the University Museum, today’s University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Ingram began publishing scholarly papers on Chinese painting and Buddhist

sculpture in the *Bulletin of the Pennsylvania Museum*, a PMA publication. In early February 1930, Isabel Ingram and William Mayer were married in Beijing. Unlike Ingram, Mayer was not a native of China but, as an officer in the U.S. Army, he had multiple postings to China, serving as military observer and attaché at the U.S. Embassy.

Assembling the Mayer Collection

At the time, an interest in small bronze artifacts from China’s northern frontier regions flourished in Beijing among private collectors for whom the more spectacular bronzes, sculptures, and paintings were out of reach. Bronzes of this type are often referred to as “Ordos” or “northern zone” bronzes. One of the reasons for their popularity was a renewed interest in the Scythians, an Iranian nomadic group inhabiting the Eurasian steppes between the 7th and the 4th centuries BCE. Documented discoveries of Scythian objects, magnificently wrought in gold and silver with a distinctive “animal-style,” began in southern Russia in 1763. In the 19th and 20th centuries, many similar forms were found in the vast steppe region extending from China to Eastern Europe. The so-called Maikop Treasure from the Crimea, a portion of which



ABOVE: Examples of the diverse bronze ornaments found in the Mayer Collection. PM objects (from top to bottom) 41-37-278, 41-37-365, and 41-37-378A.



ABOVE: Isabel Ingram (front right) with Rabindranath Tagore (front, sitting), and Chinese poets Xu Zhimo (rear left) and Lin Huiyin (front left), 1924. Collection of Kenneth Mayer.

OPPOSITE: Isabel Ingram (right) with Empress Wanrong (seated) and Reginald Johnston in the Forbidden City, Beijing, 1924. Collection of Kenneth Mayer.



Mapping the Route

LEFT: Map showing the cities the Mayers visited on their collecting expedition in 1930. Their travels focused on the region in northern China where farming gave way to nomadism.

Searching the Chinese Markets

RIGHT: The market in Chefang, China, ca. 1930s. The Mayers would have encountered similar market places on their collecting journey. Photograph from the Library of Congress.



is in the collection of the Penn Museum, is one such early 20th-century discovery. The spectacular finds in Eastern Europe and Ingram's familiarity with contemporary Scythian scholarship, evident from her correspondence with Horace Jayne, might have inspired the Mayers to become interested in these objects with similar motifs from northern China.

A map of the Eurasian steppes sent to William Mayer by Ellis H. Minns, a Scythian scholar at the University of Cambridge, is among the Mayers' surviving papers and bears the words, "From Ellis H. Minns, beyond the west of this map, to William B. Mayer, beyond its eastern edge. A symbol of how far interest in the Scythians extends. 19 May, 1931." The close relationship between Isabel Ingram and Frans August

LEFT: A bronze knife and knife sheath from the Mayer Collection. PM objects 41-37-191 (top) and 41-37-264 (bottom).

Larson, an influential figure in the study of the nomadic culture of Northern Asia who was in Mongolia at that time, might also have encouraged their collecting.

The Mayers started their collecting journey around 1930. According to their *Descriptive List of the Mayer Collection of Scythian Bronzes* in the Penn Museum Archives, the collection was "gathered from Mongolia, Kuei Hua Ch'eng [modern Hohhot], Kalgan [Zhangjiakou], Sianfu [Xi'an], Taiyuanfu [Taiyuan] and Peking [modern Beijing]." In a letter to Horace Jayne on March 6, 1931 from Peking, Ingram wrote about their collecting experience, "We are enormously proud of the collection; it represents a year's work and travel from Sianfu to Suiyuan and Mongolia. We have found the richest sources to be North East Mongolia, Suiyuan, and North Shensi [Shaanxi]. If there are any curio shops in Peking where we have not looked, it's only because they are not visible to the naked eye." As the letter shows, the main cities where the Mayers purchased their collection were Xi'an, Taiyuan, Hohhot, Zhangjiakou, and Beijing in the region where farming traditionally gave way to nomadism in Northern China.

Once this group of objects had been brought together, the collection attracted the interest of the Beijing



expatriate community. Carl Whiting Bishop, representative of the Freer Gallery of Art in Beijing, wrote expressing his gratitude to William Mayer for letting him see the collection. The Swedish sinologist and art historian, Orvar Karlbeck—in Beijing collecting for the Stockholm Museum and private collectors—assisted the Mayers in cataloging their objects, which he rated highly. Karlbeck also mentioned the William Mayer Collection to Olov Janse, a Swedish archaeologist, who referred to the collection in “Un Groupe de bronzes anciennes propres à l’Extrême-Asie méridionale” published in the *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* in 1931.

Finding a Home for the Collection

The close relationship between Isabel Ingram and Horace Jayne might have led the Mayers to approach the Penn Museum about their collection, which they offered for purchase in 1931. The Museum paid Isabel Ingram in advance and the collection was sent on approval. However, when these objects arrived at the Penn Museum in April of that year, Jayne was disappointed with “the lack of fine, large pieces.” In the 1930s, large Chinese ritual bronzes were more enthusiastically welcomed by Chinese and Western collectors. After some haggling back and



ABOVE: Yuan style painting in ink and muted color on silk. A fur-clad, leather booted Tartar horseman is depicted here on a small Mongolian pony returning from a winter hunt with a slain deer and a large bird slung over the saddle. Ornaments examined by the author may have decorated the tack of horses like this. PM object C448.



Nomads in Mongolia still rely on horses for transportation and herding. Photograph by Alastair Rae, London, U.K., via Wikimedia Commons.

forth between William Mayer and Jayne and with Jayne's successor, Director George Clapp Vaillant, the Mayer Collection was eventually purchased by the Museum and formally accessioned in 1941.

In addition to the items William Mayer shipped to Philadelphia in 1931, the Mayers also retained a small group of objects from their collection activities. William Mayer offered these additional objects to the dealer C.T.



ABOVE: Modern Mongolian horse tack is highly decorated, with design motifs similar to those found in the Mayer Collection. Photograph from Wikimedia.

Loo in the early 1950s. In 1960, the great collector of Chinese bronzes, Arthur M. Sackler, purchased this part of the collection from Frank Caro, who had taken over C.T. Loo's business when he retired. In this small group of objects, William Mayer retained artifact types such as the dagger, buckle, plaque,

and spoon, which have counterparts in the collection at Penn. Most of Mayer's objects that entered the Sackler Collection were published in Emma Bunker's 1997 catalog, *Ancient Bronzes of the Eastern Eurasian Steppes*. In her contribution to this book, Trudy Kawami, while writing about the formation of the Sackler Collection, noted that, "although it was assumed that Mayer kept his Ordos collection intact, family members may have retained some examples, while the disposition of others is unknown." We may now state that the main part of the Mayer's "lost" Ordos collection is in fact in the Penn Museum.

The Mayer Collection in the Penn Museum comprises 464 small bronzes, including daggers, harnesses, decorative plaques, and a variety of small ornaments. In their original classification, the Mayers identified two categories, "Scythian Bronzes" and "Sino-Scythian Bronzes." The Penn Museum catalog subsequently adopted the term "Ordos bronzes" devised by the Swedish scholar Johan G. Andersson, who was the Director of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm in the 1930s. Nowadays the term "Ordos" refers not only to today's "Ordos region" of southern Mongolia near Shaanxi and Ningxia provinces, but more generally to everything east and south of the Langshan mountain range in Inner Mongolia, Shaanxi, Hebei, and Shanxi provinces.



Bronze Adornment

Clockwise, from top left: a clothing buckle, two harness ornaments, a bell, a horse bit, and a harness ornament from the Mayer Collection. PM objects 41-37-207, 41-37-335, 41-37-419, 41-37-338, 41-37-244, and 41-37-367.

Metallurgical Analysis of the Bronzes

With the dramatic advances in Chinese archaeology since the 1950s, scientifically recorded archaeological contexts for comparable objects have become available. One thing that has become clear is that the Mayer Collection is regionally and chronologically diverse in a way that may not have been obvious to the Mayers at the time they were pursuing “Scythian” artifacts. Besides the Ordos bronzes, which are usually dated between the 12th century BCE and 3rd century CE, there are also many objects made not only of bronze but also brass or other materials from later periods, such as the Medieval period and even the Liao and Jin dynasties (10th to 13th centuries CE). Some decorative motifs of these objects can be clearly traced to the Chinese Central Plains, rather than the nomadic northern zone.

In the spring of 2016, Moritz Jansen, Teaching Specialist in the Center for the Analysis of Archaeological Materials (CAAM) at the Penn Museum, and I conducted a metallurgical analysis on the Mayer Collection. In this analysis, we primarily used portable X-ray fluorescence spectrometry (XRF) to do the non-destructive qualitative compositional analysis of the surface of all the objects. The results show that there is much diversity within the Mayer Collection. Various types of alloys are

represented, with the majority being leaded bronze. Gilt and tin-enriched surfaces were also found. A description of objects and results of the metallurgical analysis begin on page 16. Both the comparable objects with intact archaeological context and the results from the metallurgical analysis provide new evidence that will enable future re-cataloging and research on the Mayer Collection at Penn. ●

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FOR FURTHER READING

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