Fantastic Beasts Of The Eurasian Steppes: Toward A Revisionist Approach To Animal-Style Art

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Abstract
Animal style is a centuries-old approach to decoration characteristic of the various cultures which flourished along the Eurasian steppe belt in the later half of the first millennium BCE. This vast territory stretching from the Mongolian Plateau to the Hungarian Plain, has yielded hundreds of archaeological finds associated with the early Iron Age. Among these discoveries, high-end metalwork, textiles and tomb furniture, intricately embellished with idiosyncratic zoomorphic motifs, stand out as a recurrent element. While scholarship has labeled animal-style imagery as scenes of combat, this dissertation argues against this overly simplified classification model which ignores the variety of visual tools employed in the abstraction of fantastic hybrids. I identify five primary categories in the arrangement and portrayal of zoomorphic designs: these traits, frequently occurring in clusters, constitute the first comprehensive definition of animal-style art. Each chapter focuses on the materiality and strategic placement of a different type of animal-style object: headdresses, torques and plaques often embellish the body of the deceased whereas felt, leather and silk textiles used as ceiling hangings, rugs, and coffin covers serve to define the tomb's spatial parameters. Lastly, the dissertation also delves into the continuous retention of animal-style motifs in the arts of the Eurasian steppes after the dawn of the first millennium BCE thus challenging the narrative that animal art disappeared after the Iron Age. I demonstrate that elite members of the various pastoral societies perched along the peripheries of sedentary empires invented local interpretations of a common visual language made of tropes and devices (such as "visual synecdoche" and "frame narrative") resulting from ingenious interpretations of the above-mentioned five categories. In so doing, they aimed to tackle an identical conceptual problem: the attendance of a real audience of a certain social stature during the funerary ceremony and the presence of an imagined (divine) one in the afterlife. The dissertation thus deconstructs the politically-motivated role of animal-style items in elite burials and argues that animal art was a constructed visual language intelligible to a small nucleus of elites whose sociopolitical status and network of influence were in fact inextricably linked to their level of fluency in it.

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