
THE SCYTHIANS: THEIR ART AND NEEDLEWORK

BY THL Genevieve de Valois

Who Were the Scythians?

This is a question that has puzzled the scholars for centuries. Their origin is often the subject of hot debate and frequently so in international courts. Some suggest they were of Mongolian descent; others are adamant they are of Iranian heritage. DNA testing has shown that they were a people of mixed backgrounds and has provided no answers to this question.

Regardless, we do know they were a people to be reckoned with, who possessed great power from between the 8th - 1st Centuries BCE. They roamed the plains of Central Asia and Southern Russia, often conquering the native peoples. They were feared by the "Super Powers" of their day because of their prowess on the horse in battle, a tactic that was almost unheard of at that time.

Horse Saddle or Kurgan I, 5th C. BCE



What Was Their Art Like?

Their art was extremely colorful, highly decorative and imaginative. Normal themes included geometric motifs, as well as plant and animal motifs. Many of their designs are similar to those of the Assyrians, Persians and Indians, though it is not known whether the designs were imported or original to the Scythians.

Common designs included leopards, griffins, eagles and the horned ram, animals they viewed as having religious contexts. Plant life was also included, such as the lotus and the rosette.

Sometimes they used wild and imaginary monsters and beasts, while other times their arts depicted a more normal scene, such as a wall hanging from 4th century BCE that depicts a man on his horse coming before the throne of the queen. Some suggest this is a figural representation of the "Goddess". However, it is documented that women were strong in the culture and were among some of the greatest warriors, priestesses and queens, so it may be more likely she was the Queen.

The Scythians' prowess in art includes appliqué, embroidery, leather work, fine gold work, sculpting and carving of bone and of wood.

Their Needlework

There are many textiles that were preserved in Scythian gravesites that are available for study today.

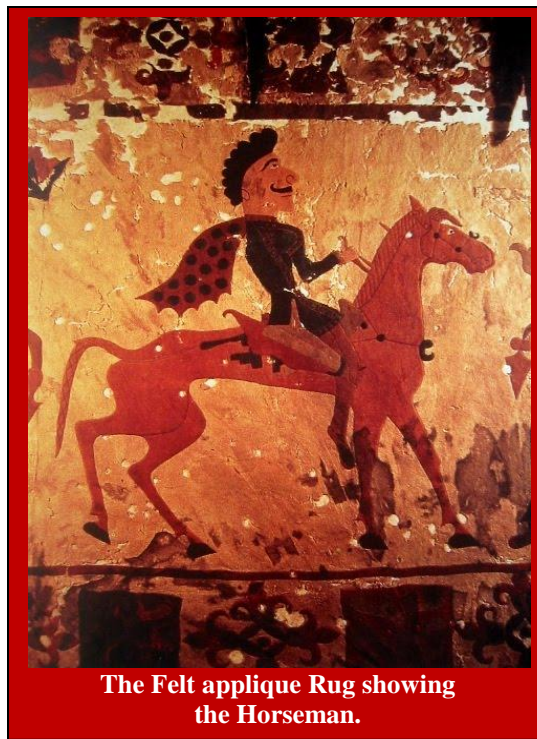
The most prominent textiles available from the graves are made of felt. There are felt appliqué wall hangings and felt appliqué horse blankets. These pieces are brightly colored and magnificently done. The felt was dyed, then cut and applied into intricate and amazing patterns with basic chain stitch embroidery in twisted wool threads. There are also examples of clothing that are well preserved that were profusely trimmed with embroidery and with felt appliqué.

While there are archaeological descriptions of the textiles found, I have not yet been able to find a study published exclusively discussing the textile techniques and embroidery styles. While pictures abound, there are few records as to the variety of stitches and styles of embroidery used. I have found references to the following stitches used in these works: Stem Stitch, chain stitch laid/couching work, tambour stitch, knot stitch, blanket stitch, satin stitch and padded/raised work. Embroidery was done in both wool and silk threads. However, it is possible that the items embroidered in silk may have been imported.

One account says that the border of a felt appliqué saddle blanket from around the 4th century BCE was "surrounded by decorative embroidery forming a filigree border." Unfortunately, as is often the case, the reference does not state the stitches or materials used. The aforementioned piece is of a griffin, though with the body of a lion, that is outstretched. Every line of muscle and each feather are outlined in embroidery.

There is also a fragment of wall hanging that is felt appliquéd in the "Indian Lotus" motif. It consists of no less than five different colors, none of which touch each other, and is applied with different colored wool threads, in the chain stitch style. It is suggested that this pattern idea was brought to the Scythians via trade with Persia.

Perhaps the most extraordinary existing piece is a brightly colored horse blanket or saddle cover that belonged to Kurgan I. It consists of applied felt, horse hair tassels and applied leather and has extensive embroidery.



The Felt applique Rug showing the Horseman.

There is also record of a quilt discovered at a Scythian burial site that dates to about 100 BCE. This piece is considered to be the earliest surviving example of a quilt. The patterns include clockwise & anti-clockwise spiral patterns, interlocking geometric designs, trees and magnificent, stylized animals. It makes extensive use of the backstitch. Each detail is outlined with a closely stitched twisted thread and quilted to the foundation. The backstitching is done in tiny concentric lines that are different for each animal on the quilt. It is said by many scholars that the magnificence, detail and execution of the quilt are proof that it was a long-practiced tradition.

Why Should We Be Interested in Their Art?

Because of the Scythians' nomadic nature and great power and influence in the region, their trading was extensive. There are records of their trade with the Chinese; Greeks, Phoenicians, Macedonians, Egyptians and Persians. Their tombs were found with Assyrian weaponry and horse decorations, with Persian textiles and Chinese Silks. Scythian Artifacts have turned up all over the region, including several items in Hungary.

The Quilt, 1st Century BCE



Because of their vast trading and influence, many of the cultures in Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the Middle East trace the origins of their "now" traditional art forms back to the Scythian people. Additionally, due to the unique (frozen) conditions of their burial sites many items that would otherwise long have disappeared have been almost perfectly preserved.

Where there are only rare examples of embroidery and textiles from their neighbors and peers there are many examples from the Scythians for scholars to study.

From this study, we can learn not only about the arts and crafts of the Scythians but also all of the peoples they encountered.



Invalid websites: (I referenced these when writing the original article and they are no longer available online.

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Gallery of other Embroidered artifacts taken from the Silk Road Seattle Website:

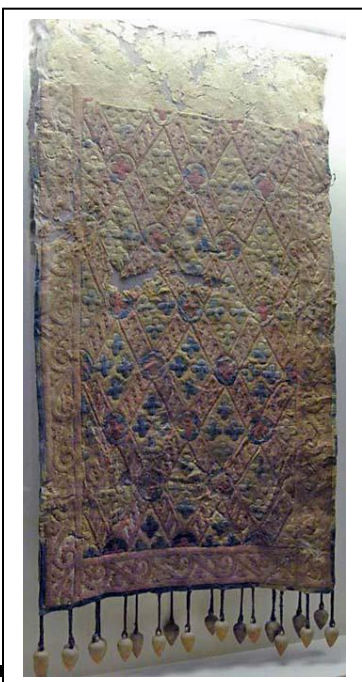
1. An embroidered boot, 5th century BC. It comes from the Altai region in Russia and belongs to the Pazyryk Culture. It is embroidered in chain stitch, tambour stitch and , stem stitch in colored silks. Other materials of the boot include felted wool, leather and silk linings.



2. Saddle cover. Pazyryk, Altai, Barrow no. 5, 252-238 BCE. 5th riding outfit. Pub.: Rudenko 1953, pp. 210-218, esp. fig. 128; Rudenko 1970, pp. 172-177, esp. fig. 88. Individual parts of decoration shown in separate plates.



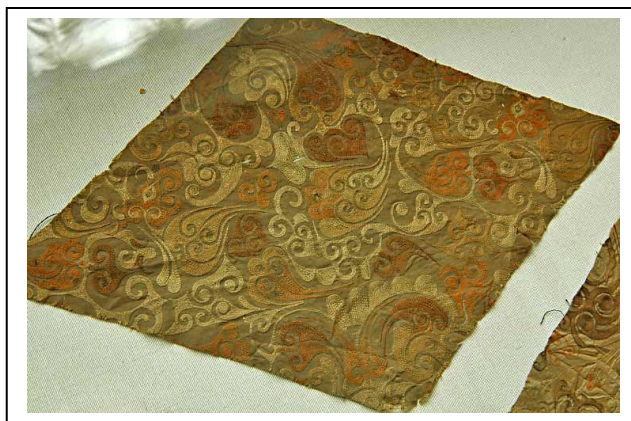
3. Saddle blanket (shabrack). Pazyryk, Altai, Barrow no. 5, 252-238 BCE. 4th riding outfit, felt. 65 x 233 cm. Pub.: Rudenko 1953, p. 210; pl. CIII; Rudenko 1970, p. 173; pl. 162.



4. Saddle-blanket (shabrack). Pazyryk, Altai, Barrow no. 5, 252-238 BCE. 2nd riding outfit, felt. 70 x 236 cm. Pub.: Rudenko 1953, p. 208; pl. CI; Rudenko 1970, p. 169; pl. 160; Charrière, fig. 120



5. Two Frags. of embroidered silk. barrow no. 6. 39.5 x 35.7 cm.; frag. 18/2, 21 x 15 cm. Inv. no. 75. Scythian 1969, no. 82; Trever, pp. 37-38; pl. 18/2; Hermitage [website](#).



6. Ceiling hanging made of various embroidered woolen fabrics (details). Barrow no. 6., on beams of external ceiling. Total size of carpet 4.4 x 3.2 m.; portion with tiger skin design, 152x175 cm.; fragment 4, 29 x 28 cm. Inv. nos. 155, 150. Pub.: Rudenko 1962, pp. 85-87, pls. XLIX, XL, LII-LVI; Trever, pp. 31-32, 34-35, pls. 4, 5, 11, 12.

