Restoration and display of the Kyrgyz State Museum precious metals collection

The small vault in the basement of the Kyrgyz State Museum in Bishkek houses a remarkable collection of jewelry and artifacts that make up the funeral hoard of a Hun noblewoman who lived and died sometime between the first and fifth centuries.

Each object is highly unusual and exquisite. There is a diadem with a fringe of gold tubes, the crown still partially inlaid with semiprecious stones; a group of medallions set with cornelian once used to decorate a bridle and saddle; jade bangles; a pair of rings; and a breast ornament decorated with amber and a central figure carved out of garnet. By far the most striking object is the funeral mask, an eerie face of beaten gold with cornelian eyes and tree shaped decorations on the cheeks and nose.

Although the collection was discovered in 1958 and has been exhibited in Europe and Japan, it has never been put on display for the Kyrgyz people. Because the Kyrgyz State Museum had inadequate security and display facilities, the collection was kept sealed in the vault.

Under a 2006 grant from the U.S. Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation, the Centre for Museums Initiatives, an NGO, purchased display cabinets and modern security alarms so that the Kyrgyz people could see these interesting artifacts of their cultural history. Further, the project is making precise copies of the most important pieces in the collection, so that the originals can be protected from excessive handling and changes in temperature.

In addition to the 156 objects from the Hun tomb, the museum's precious metals collection includes: ancient Scythian artifacts, including two bronze sacrificial altar supports shaped like women, and brooches of gold plated bronze decorated with Buddha figures from the eighth and ninth centuries. A bronze Buddhist statue shows clear signs of Indian influence.

In addition to underscoring the country's diverse and rich historical and religious traditions, the collection showcases Kyrgyzstan's brilliant metalworking tradition.