Spirit of the Nation

Animals in the heart, and the art, of Mongolia.

by Brooke Chilvers

HORSES ARE everywhere you look, robust and gleaming as they graze beneath Mongolia's Eternal Blue Sky. They come in every color of the equine rainbow: white, tan, bay, chestnut, auburn, dappled gray, jet black. Cattle, sheep and goats speckle infinite stretches of summer green. Bactrian camels amble in time to car-radio music; wacky yaks just stand and stare. There are argali sheep, ibex, gazelles, saiga antelope, maral deer, rare wild asses and wild camels, wolves, snow leopards, Gobi bears, the Przewalski wild horse, conserved in national parks and reserves. Even the Mongolian people believe they descend not from apes but from the union of a blue wolf and a fallow deer. Animals *are* Mongolia.

Despite millennia of warfare, centuries of Tibetan Buddhism and 70 years of repression by the Soviet Union, marked by the exile or murder of 30,000 monks, teachers and artists and the looting and destruction of treasure-filled monasteries, the time-honored art that expresses the spiritual connection between the equestrian nomadic herdsman of the Central Asian steppe and his animal kingdom is thriving in Mongolia's 15-year-old democracy.

In the lands north of the Great Wall of China and south of the Siberian taiga, Paleolithic inhabitants spoke to their gods of the hunt through thousands of carved and painted petroglyphs of ibex, bugling deer and packs of wolves. The Bronze Age added to the mix harnessed chariots and hunters armed with bows. The Mongolian's innate reverence for the sky, mountains and fire reaches back to these images hammered into rock.

By 2000 B.C. burial mounds reveal that horses were more than just meat; as mounts, they were adorned, sacrificed and ritualistically buried. Sometime around 800 B.C. early pastoralists began erecting hundreds of six- to 15-foot-tall granite monuments carved with zoomorphic motifs we call "deer stones" or "deer stele," of which some 550 remain. At the top of the stele is the sky with the sun or moon; in the middle are the highly stylized silhouettes of deer; and at the bottom are the bows and arrows of the underworld deities, conveying the shamanist belief that deer carry the spirits of the dead to the next life.

We refer to the equestrian nomads of Central Asia from 6th century B.C. to the early Christian era as Scythians. Their culture is characterized by the stylized and symbolic "Animal Style" images that adorned their tools, daggers, belt buckles and horse-trappings. Carved, tinned, gilded or embroidered, these elegant interweavings of bovids, ibex, elk and mouflon were more than just visual representations of the natural world. Mythological griffins and winged horses expressed the supernatural forces that guided their lives; as, for example, on their annual migrations seeking grazing for their livestock. The horse's harness fittings, breastbands, cruppers and saddles were generously decorated with animal-shaped ornaments made of precious metal; during ceremonies the horses wore elaborate masks and headdresses topped with impressive deer antlers.

Even though no actual portrait exists of Genghis Khan (1162-1227), he forms our most vivid image of the Mongolian horseman. With his sons and grandsons and a cavalry of 100,000, Genghis Khan conquered the largest contiguous empire in history in only 25 years and destroyed the aristocracy from northern China to the plains of Hungary. Yet his immediate bloodlines went on to found the artistically rich cultures of the Golden Horde in Russia, the Moghul Empire in India and the Ilkhanates in Persia and Iraq. His grandson, Khubilai Khan, moved the Mongolian capital of Karakorum to Beijing in 1264, establishing the Yuan Dynasty.

The equestrian warrior's connection to animals was through his animist religion and the hunt. Born in the unforgiving forested mountains of northern Mongolia near Siberia, Genghis and his kin survived by hunting elk, bear and boar. As general, he organized large-scale hunts to feed his followers that lasted days, his mounted men encircling an

area and driving the game to the center to be killed with a bow. As victor, "He treated hostile civilians as animals to be herded but hostile soldiers as game to be hunted," writes Jack Weatherford in his page-turning book, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World.*

The Mongol's weapons were his five horses, small and large birch-wood composite bows with a 100- to 160-pound pull and quivers with 60 arrows. During a feigned retreat intended to draw the enemy out of his walled cities, the Mongol warrior would stand up in his stirrups, turn around and shoot arrows behind him at the scattered infantry up to 350 yards away—the so-called "Parthian shot."

Few artifacts from this period survive, but based on later armor from neighboring Tibet, with which Mongolia had deep spiritual and military ties starting with Genghis's grandson, Godan, we know that Mongol warriors and their horses wore handsome "lamellar" armor made of overlapping iron, bronze or lacquered-leather plates tied by leather laces into horizontal rows. The horse's head, breast and neck defenses (shaffron, peytral, crinet) were sometimes elaborately decorated, probably with auspicious symbols or animal icons that would have included the "four friendly animals" such as elephant, the "four strong animals" such as lion, or the Asian zodiac that includes the horse and the ram. This fairly flexible armor allowed the warrior to fall off his 14-hand horse and get back on, which alone quickly made Europe's cumbersome medieval armor of the same period obsolete.

Unlike Japanese or European knights who fought for honor or God, the Mongol invasions were really just an extreme method of amassing the advanced goods—silk cloth, furniture, spices, projectile weapons—produced in wealthier cities. It is said the nomadic Mongols didn't weave cloth, cast metal, make pottery or bake bread; they didn't manufacture porcelain, paint pictures or erect buildings. Instead they captured tens of thousands of craftsmen and set them to work, creating throughout the known world a cross-cultural renaissance in the arts in which animal motifs—including the *khamar ugalz* (nose pattern) and *ever ugalz* (horn pattern), which date back to prehistoric nomads—are a recurring theme.

Although Genghis Khan tolerated his subjects' Buddhist, Nestorian Christian or Islamic beliefs, with his own shamanist people the horse retained its high spiritual status. In fact, the warrior's soul found its embodiment in his sulde or Spirit Banner, which he made by tying strands of his best stallions' hair below the blade of his standard's long shaft. The *sulde* channeled the militant powers of nature that determine the warrior's destiny and then became the physical resting place of his soul. (Genghis Khan's sulde was venerated and protected for centuries by lamas until, in 1937 under the Soviets, it disappeared from their monastery.)

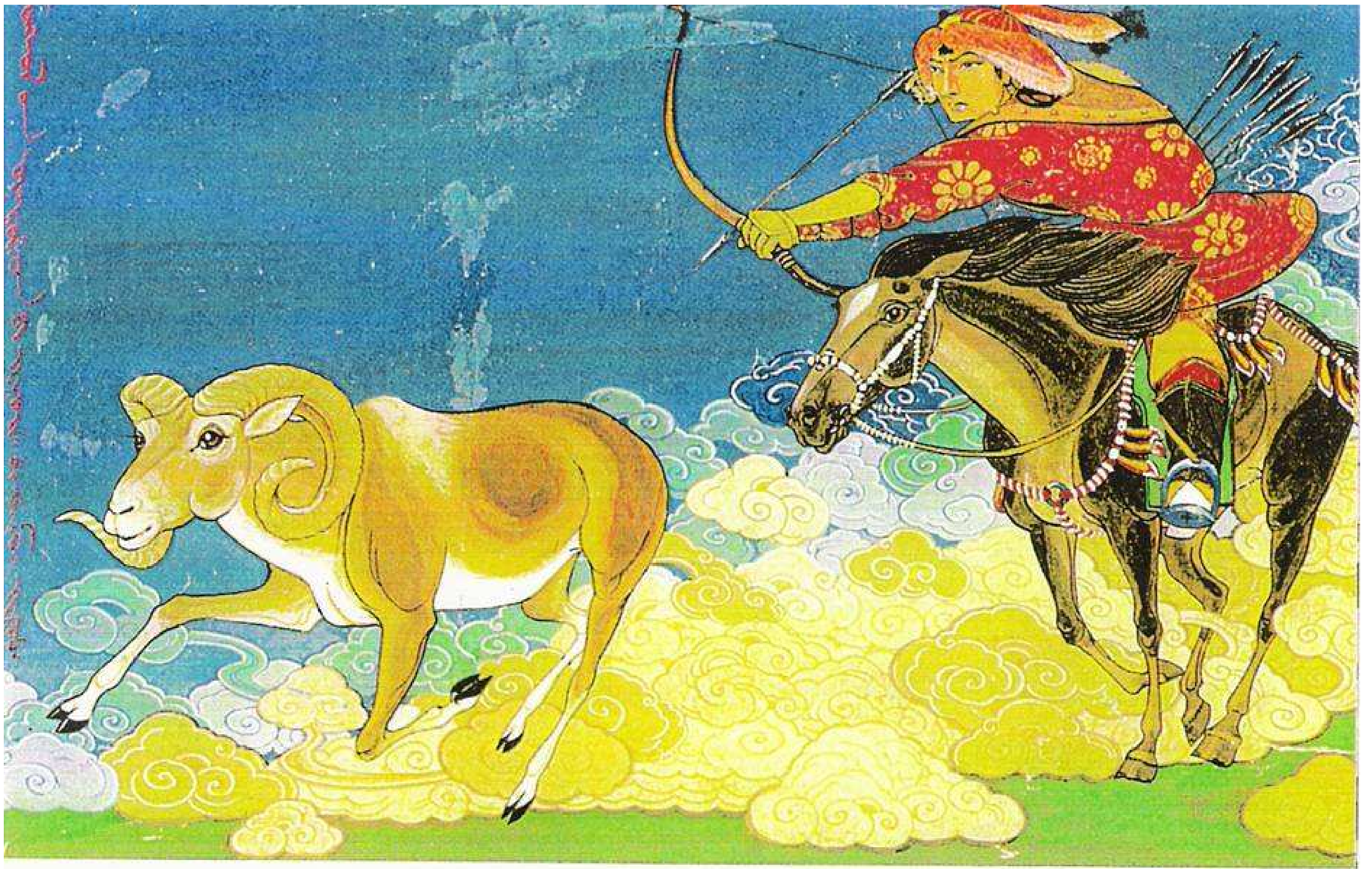
Tibet's other export to Mongolia was Lamaistic Buddhism, which became the official religion in 1578. In Buddhism's huge pantheon of gods and devils, the Mongolian "Yellow Hat" school was sure to include fiery armored equestrian gods carrying bows and quivers that are direct imports of familiar Mongolian household and shamanistic divinities. Brightly colored images of the armed horse-riding Sulde Tngri and Gesar Khan, the protector of warriors and herds, are deeply rooted in Mongolian tradition. And horses are still celebrated during the Lunar New Year with offerings and incense to summon a guardian or ancestral spirit.

When the Russian "advisors" withdrew in 1990, they seem to have taken countless national treasures with them. The term Mongol zurag describes the centuries-old secular folk art that portrays the daily life of the mounted herdsman. Yet there is only one masterpiece in Mongolia's museums: B. Sharav's (1869-1939) *One Day in Mongolia*—a "naïve" perspective- and shadow-free kaleidoscope of images of steppe life with its activities and animals—and it serves as an inspiration to many artists working today. O. Tsevegjav's more "European" works, classified as "bourgeois western propaganda" during his lifetime, capture the still beauty of the herder's dawn or the bursting energy of wild stallions in combat.

Today, in the gift shops of provincial museums, tourist camps and parks like Gobi Gurvan Saikhan National Park, I found watercolors, ink paintings and drawings that are 21st century expressions of the old tie between the equestrian nomad of the Central Asian steppe and animals. In one, the mounted hunter, his bow pulled taut, closes in on the argali fleeing across a mountaintop in a whirl of rising clouds under the Eternal Blue Sky. In another, the hunter on a foaming steed chases a herd of saiga antelope in a wash of sunset colors; while in another, hunters in traditional garb knock over a black-tailed gazelle with a well-placed arrow.

I cannot read the names of the anonymous artists written vertically down the page, like Chinese, in the letters of the Mongolian script. Yet in my heart I know these works express the spirit of a nation still linked to its animals and ancestors—unlike, alas, our own. ■

Brooke returned from Mongolia with six paintings, five cashmere sweaters and trophy blisters from riding the Mongolian Big Four: a horse, a camel, a yak and a reindeer.



"Hunting Argali Under The Eternal Blue Sky," an original oil on canvas, 9 x 13 inches, by Anonymous.
Courtesy Brooke Chilvers.