

# Sacred & Mundane

ARTIFACTS OF CONTEMPORARY CULTURE



## Call of the Wild

BY TERESA JORDAN

A golden eagle eyed me intently as I made my way to an outhouse in Barskoon, a small farming village in the Tien Shan mountain range of northeastern Kyrgyzstan. He lived on a gnarled stump in the yard, and was the hunting companion of Grandfather Obolbekov, whose son and daughter-in-law ran the guesthouse where I lodged.

Grandfather Obolbekov is a falconer. I never saw him far from his eagle or his Saker falcon. He rode out on horseback each day to hunt, one or the other bird perched on his arm. When he returned home, his young grandchildren clustered around him, and he often let them hold the falcon, instructing them in the principles of his art.

Falconry began in this part of the world as early as six thousand years ago and hasn't changed much since. "It is a rare

experience in modern life to come face to face with the cold black eyes of true wildness," wrote American novelist and falconer Dan O'Brien, and it's the inexorable wildness of these birds that makes their interaction with humans unique. Man has forged working relationships with other species, from barnyard fowl to horses, dogs, and cows, adapting their behavior through selective breeding to better serve his needs. But falconers have resisted the temptation to domesticate. Today, as of old, they trap young adults, train them, hunt with them until the birds reach full sexual maturity, and ultimately return them to the wild. The birds hatch, breed, and die outside captivity. I can't think of another instance where man has enlisted aid from a creature without attempting to change its essential nature.

I witnessed a hunting exhibition during the At Chabysh horse festival. The Kyrgyz are horse people and the races and horse games garnered great excitement.

The crowd was mobile and animated. But a hush fell when the birdmen climbed the hill to demonstrate their art. In their long embroidered coats and high felt hats, their eagles perched on their arms, they looked like wizards.

A rabbit was released. A falconer unhooded his bird. The crowd held its breath while watching the brutal beauty of evolutionary perfection: the eagle soaring, swooping, clutching, killing, and then—in a move outside the evolutionary playbook—returning to its handler's arm and giving over its prey.

The trained birds kill no animals that they would not have otherwise hunted on their own. And while there is no perfect relationship between humanity and wildness—I suspect a mouse snapped up by a coyote would tell us there is no perfect relationship in the wild, period—falconry represents a sensitivity that is hard to find elsewhere in human experience: the bird willing to return if asked; the falconer willing, at some point, to refrain from the request.

## History of the World Redux

BY NANCY LORD

Hanging from the white wall, with its wonderfully fierce alligator jaw reaching toward our heads and its long bony tail