

The Siberian collections in the Musée de l'Homme

Françoise Delaby and Marie-Lise Beffa

The Siberian collections in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris (some 2,000 objects) are comprised primarily of a variety of objects collected in many different groups. These objects, picked up here and there by various travelers, anthropologists, antique dealers, etc. by no means cover the material and religious life of the Siberian peoples (some thirty groups divided between two linguistic families – Uralian and Altaic – and the Paleo-Asian pseudo-family, not all of which are represented either).

It would thus be pointless to try to enumerate all the Siberian collections; we will therefore deal with three exceptional groups: the Chukches, the Ainus and the Tungus.

1. The Chukches

The first collection (M.H.11.20) has two qualities that make it exceptional: its exhaustiveness and the way it was constituted. In 1898, a Russian government employee, Nicolas Gondatti, took it upon himself to present France with more than 300 objects used in the daily life or religious ceremonies of the Chukches, a small population of the Paleo-Asian pseudo-family earning a livelihood from reindeer husbandry and the hunting of marine mammals on the northeast coast of Siberia. These objects were gathered systematically so as to cover the whole culture of this ethnic group; they are accompanied by an excellent documentation. Indeed, Gondatti, who was a trained ethnographer, had gone to the trouble of including a highly accurate inventory of the use of these objects and their vernacular name. Gondatti also sent a similar collection to the Saint Petersburg museum. This was described and studied in detail by

the great Chukche expert Bogoraz. There are thus two valuable sources of documentation available for these objects.

2. The Ainus

The second group of objects contains various collections concerning the Ainus, a small people from the Paleo-Asian pseudo-family living on the island of Hokkaido and formerly on Sakhalin. The clothes items of ancient clothing, in particular, are, according to Professor Josef Kreiner (University of Cologne) exceptionally beautiful. In 1899, Paul Labbé bought three ceremonial cloaks made of elm barkcloth (M.H.99.76) on Sakhalin and, in 1919 George Montandon acquired four similar cloaks that come from Hokkaido (M.H.43.15). On the same trip, he collected some one hundred profane and ritual Ainu objects: fox skulls for divination, wands (*inao*), woven belts, sabers, bowls, spoons, etc. Batchelor, one of the top Ainu specialists of the time, pronounced the collection “one of the most important he had ever seen leave the island”.

An abundant documentation on these objects has been established by both early and modern authors.

3. The Tungus

The third group of objects concerns the Tungus (a branch of the Altaic family that includes several groups of reindeer hunters dispersed throughout Siberia). The collection was assembled by different collectors, the most important of whom remains Joseph Martin, a learned adventurer who combined hunting for gold with mapping the regions bordering on China for the Russian government. At the end of the 19th century, Joseph Martin returned from his explorations in the Stanovoi Mountains of eastern Siberia with dozens of crates of objects, which were subsequently divided up between the museums of Paris, Lyons and Bordeaux.

The masterpiece of his collection (M.H.87.42) is the complete panoply – it is its exhaustive character that is so exceptional – of a great Tungus shaman (*evenk*). With the costume come all the accessories needed by a shaman to accompany the soul of those having died a tragic death to the other world. At the time, taking a reindeer caravan through these unexplored mountains was very dangerous, and Joseph Martin tells us, in an expedition report, that at night he often heard the drum beating for those who had died in an accident (under falling rocks or in a mountain stream). Such a death requires an important ritual to definitively be rid of the vengeful soul of the deceased, and only a first-rate shaman can perform it. The costume includes: the jacket with all the dangling pieces of metal and cloth, the collar, the cloth cap and the metal headdress with its antlers, the copper mask, the hobby horses to ride in the other world, the drum with its two beaters – one for the day roads, the other for the night roads – in sum the whole paraphernalia that enables the shaman to travel the roads of the universe. To this must be added the wooden and metal figurines of spirits brought back by the same explorer.

As well as the shamanic items, there are a few other figurines of spirits, purchased in 1966 from the Berlin-based antique dealer Klinkmuller (M.H.66.46). The origin of these statuettes of human personages or animals – formerly from the collection assembled by a German consul to Vladivostok in the 1920s – is not clearly specified, but the style of some of them is typically Tungus.

Tungus material culture is represented by a few very old items of clothing (among which two chamois plastrons embellished with beads and fur trimming (interesting despite their poor state of conservation) and some household utensils made from birch bark (a crib, boxes, various containers, spoons and ladles), of which the Museum has a great variety. The finest come from the east-coast Tungus groups (Nanais, Udeghes, Oroks, etc.), who decorate them with refined sworls and interlacing patterns.

The art of these Tungus of the Siberian east coast is magnificently illustrated by their costumes made of fish skins and covered with embroidery. The museum has eight

such costumes (one or two of which might come from the Nivkh, a group from the Pseudo-Paleo-Asian family neighboring the Tungus in the eastern reaches of Siberia). These long dresses are made from the skins of salmon or carp, which have been sewn together. The embroidery and the red and blue applications of fantastic animals and birds on a white background covering the whole back represent either the clan tree bearing the souls of the children not yet born or the heads of bears connected with the Bear festival. One of these costumes was acquired by Montandon in 1917 from the Vladivostok museum. These very beautiful pieces are now rarities.

Some forty small ivory or bone everyday objects (buttons, boxes for fish hooks, spoons, boxes, etc.) from the Klinkmuller collection, all decorated with the sworls and interlacing patterns typical of this region of eastern Siberia, finish off this glimpse of eastern Tungus culture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. There is also an abundant documentation, both old and modern, on the Tungus.