

## Arctic Indigenous Fish Skin Heritage Networking Event

The Arctic Indigenous Fish Skin Networking Conference has brought artists from Arctic Indigenous groups into dialogue with a community of experts, of fashion design academics and practitioners, cartographers and museum curators to create dialogue, exchange, and development. This conference, invaluable supported by the Japan Foundation Intellectual exchange conferences grant, improved knowledge of sustainable methods for fish skin production as an alternative to leather, thus addressing also sustainability issues, so pressing today.

We are all extremely grateful to the many people and institutions that have made this field trip possible. Firstly, we thank William Fitzhugh, Stephen Loring and John Cloud at the Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center for their help on writing and implementing the project grant. We are so indebted to Igor Krupnik, Aron Crowell and Dawn Biddison for their help connecting me with June Pardue in the first place, during my Fulbright award at the ASC and Anchorage Museum. We are extremely grateful to Chris To, Caroline Singh Belmar, Dabinder Rai, Joanna Gzik, Sharon Cole and the RMA team at University of the Arts for organizing this field trip at such short notice. A massive thanks is due to Mr. Mori Chairman of Osaka Institute of Fashion (OIF) providing all the necessary paperwork for the members of the team as well as to Mitsuhiro Kokita from Kyoto Seika University for providing mine. We thank Scott Sutcliff from Buka Gakuen for organising the conference venue and the Focus group at Bunka Gakuen Costume Museum and for guiding us through the very complicated Japanese rules in place for foreigners' researchers right now, as we do Oleg Mitranov and Lyna Torayashiki for their invaluable translating work during the trip, as well as John Cloud, Isaac Raine and Zhongjing Zhang for their contribution in the conference. Thank you, Nobuyuki Kamba, for connecting me with museum curators and artists around Japan and Hokkaido Island back in 2017 and thank you all the museum curators at Hokkaido University Museum (Masaru Kato); Upopoy National Ainu Museum and Park (Masahiro Nomoto); Shigero Kayano Museum (Kimihiro Kayano); Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum (Kenji and Maki Sekine); Abashiri Hokkaido museum of Northern peoples (Irumi Sasakura and Yamada Yoshiko); Bunka Gakuen Costume Museum (Naoto Tanaka). But above all I thank June Pardue and Anatoly Donkan for joining us on this trip and making it so rich; as I do other Arctic artists sadly unable to join us: Wengfen You, Lotta Rahme and Shigehiro Takano.

The project consisted of focus groups during the visits to Ainu national museums in Hokkaido and Tokyo, culminating in a conference networking event and panel discussion. The initial aim was to identify and document the historical, cultural, and environmental importance of fish skin as an innovative sustainable material. But we also wanted to contribute to the propagation of the fish skin craft and indigenous knowledge systems within its relative Arctic communities, especially with younger generations. The project ultimately aims to safeguard indigenous knowledge intangible cultural heritage, including the documentation, research, preservation, transmission and revitalization of such heritage.

The project goals were to:

- Identify the cultural and environmental importance of fishskin as a historical sustainable material.
- Document Ainu fishskin artefacts acquired from Indigenous groups by explorers and anthropologists during 19th and 20th centuries, as 'scientific specimens' documenting a 'disappearing culture'
- Interpret these fishskin treasures, with help of elders and contemporary Native artists in order to contribute their direct indigenous practitioners' knowledge about these artefacts.
- Bring Native peoples of today into closer contact with traditional knowledge that they have been deprived of for more than 150 years.
- Foster a dialogue, communicating indigenous perspectives to the fishskin artefacts, community, ceremonies, wisdom, resourcefulness and resilience to the institutions that house them.

- Encourage the local Ainu communities to take pride in their fishskin heritage, a component of their identities and a tool for community development.
- Preserve and disseminate Ainu's cultural fishskin heritage, promoting sustainable development of their unique craft culture, thus strengthening Ainu participation in international endeavours.
- Analyse approaches to creation and curation of online fishskin collections/resources, while being mindful and respectful of cultural rights, interests and values of Native communities.
- Mediate on themes of authorship, belonging, and cultural appropriation in the communication of fishskin digital cultural heritage.

Elisa Palomino organised the team, and its covid-complicated travel, and the program. She is a fashion designer and educator (Lecturer at the BA Fashion Print department at Central Saint Martins); a Fulbright Scholar and Anthropology fellow at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History. She is the UAL Academic Lead on the EU Horizon 2020- project: FishSkin, developing fish leather as a more sustainable material for fashion; her research focuses on sustainability and integration of traditional craftsmanship with new technologies.

The two main members of our team were June Pardue and Anatoly Donkan. June Pardue is a Native Alutiiq and Inupiaq Elder artist and ambassador for Knik Tribal Council in Alaska. She is a recognized educator, fish leather tanner, beader, weaver, and storyteller with works of art in the permanent collection of the Alutiiq Museum, Kodiak History Museum, Autry National Center in Los Angeles, Sheldon Jackson Museum in Sitka, and the Alaska Native Heritage Center. June recently received a Fellowship Award from the Rasmuson Foundation in Anchorage, Alaska. Anatoly Donkan is a Native Nanai from Eastern Siberia, a fish leather tanner, and sculptor. His extensive artistic career showcases the traditional Nanai fishskin tanning with exhibited work in Rijksmuseum van Oudheden in Leiden; Museum für Völkerkunde, Austria; Mimpaku National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka; Bunka Gakuen Costume Museum, Tokyo. He is also the Director and founder of Amur Ethnic Art Museum in Vladivostok and Viechtach. June and Anatoly led the focus group at the Hokkaido University Museum, Nibutani Ainu Museum, Shigeru Kayano Museum and Hokkaido Museum of Northern peoples. During these focus groups June and Anatoly examined these fish skin artifacts and added their invaluable first-hand knowledge interpreting not only the materiality but also spiritual meaning, and their place within fishskin cultural heritage at large, and, indeed, how to attribute the right value to fishskin and understand and respect more fully its cultural meaning.

Our first day focus group was held at Hokkaido University Botanical Garden and Museum with Museum curator Masaru Kato. We viewed a Sakhalin Ainu fish skin robe and several Ainu fish skin boots with grass woven socks. June noticed the similarities with her own Alutiiq grass woven socks.

The second day of our Arctic Fishskin field trip at Upopoy National Ainu Museum and Park saw first encounter of Arctic and Subarctic Native cultures: as Alaskan, met Ainu Masahiro Nomoto. Mr Nomoto, Director of Culture Promotion Department, kindly guided us through the impressive new grounds of the biggest Ainu Museum in Hokkaido and its performances of the culture of their daily life. He was also our connection with the Arctic Studies Center as contributor on the Ainu catalogue and the artist building the Ainu house (chise) and boat (itaomachip) for the Smithsonian exhibit, Ainu: Spirit of a Northern People (National Museum of Natural History in 2000). One outcome of this exhibition was this fieldtrip. It is wonderful to see one project lead to another, to strengthen old bonds to forge new ones.

Our third day saw further interarctic encounters as Eastern Siberian Nanai Native fish skin artist Anatoly joined us and met Kodiak Islander Alutiiq Native fish skin artist June. Anatoly and June interpreted the Shigeru Kayano Museum Hezhen fish skin garments created by Wengfen You, a Native Hezhen artist from Northeast China who was sadly unable to join us on this field trip. It was wonderful to see four Arctic and subarctic Native cultures united around the art of fish skin tanning.

Anatoly presented his own fish skin robe produced in collaboration with Ms. Reiko Kayano with whitened fish skins displayed at the Shigero Kayano Museum. We were also able to meet Reiko Kayano, a 91-year-old Ainu weaver and wife of Shigeru Kayano. Anatoly and Reiko had previously experimented with fish skin tanning and Reiko shared with us all the steps of recreating a Sakhalin fish skin Ainu robe replica produced by her for the Mimpaku National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka. This was another older project leading to a new one. During this rich third day we were lucky to visit the Nibutani Ainu Museum with the wonderful curator Kenji Sekine. Takarazuka born, he travelled to Nibutani thirty years ago and never left. He married Maki, an Ainu embroidery artist and whose mother, Yukiko, is one of the last elm bark weavers in Hokkaido. Kenji became so involved in the community that today his life is dedicated to reviving Ainu, a critically endangered language. Now a fluent self-taught Ainu-speaker, he teaches the language to the children in the village. He also runs educational radio shows in Ainu. Maki was also present, and she and June discussed the Ainu patterns and motifs on her Kaparamip Ainu embroidered robes. Maki's Ainu graphic work is currently featured on local buses, an Ainu limited edition of a Coca Cola bottle and many more items of everyday life. Historically, Ainu women created embroidery motifs to protect their loved ones, and they ornamented these clothes to guard family members against potential harm. Maki is bringing this tradition into the present day, as is June with her fish skin earrings and beaded purses. This evolution and continuation of tradition is also an aim of this project, as is the identification of commonalities between the Arctic groups; whether Maki or June modernising tradition, or the Alaska Native artists connecting with June via social media who noticed the similarities between the Ainu embroidered robes and their Tlingit designs. This conference aims to support such ties and identities. A sense of a greater community is created while also strengthening the sense of the smaller communities.

On our fourth and last day in Hokkaido, we had a fantastic focus group at Hokkaido Museum of Northern Peoples in Abashiri. I am so grateful to curator Ms Irumi Sasakura who spent all day with us. We had the opportunity to view all the artefacts that Anatoly had created for the museum twenty years ago. Anatoly demonstrated the traditional techniques as practiced by the Nanai along the Amur, sharing tools, knowledge, and processes. He showed us how to use the Nanai wooden jaw tool he created to soften fish skins during the tanning process. June also shared her Alutiiq traditional fishskin tanning methods. Exactly this mutually enriching cultural interface and exchange was the aim of the fieldtrip.

On the fifth and last day we held a focus group at the Bunka Gakuen Costume Museum in Tokyo, studying Anatoly's shaman robe. Then the Arctic Fish Skin Heritage conference was held at Tokyo Bunka Gakuen University with special guest lecturers.

June Pardue's presentation: 'Connecting Alaska Native communities through fish skin traditions' analysed the fish skin, basket weaving and tool collections she had seen on this trip and compared and contrasted them with their equivalents of her Alutiiq community, and their interests and values. She shared the work of fellow Native fish skin artists in Alaska as well as the prolific fish skin tanning workshops – over one hundred - that she has implemented in rural Alaska since April 2020.

Anatoly Donkan's presentation: 'Nanai shaman robes: sacred and ceremonial meaning and use'. featured his Amur Ethnic Art Museum artefacts comprising Nanai garments made of hand-painted and embroidered fish skin. He showcased the everyday and shamanistic objects from the culture of the Nanai along the Amur River in Eastern Siberia, his own replicas of historical fishskin robes and tanning tools.

Elisa Palomino's presentation on 'Arctic fish skin heritage versus contemporary fish leather' provided a mapping of fish skin craft participatory practices with Arctic indigenous communities. The application of the craft to fashion was presented through the participatory fishskin workshops that

she has co-created with various fish skin indigenous peoples to explore how this material and the transmission of fish skin skills can contribute to sustainability practices in fashion.

John Cloud's (Cartographer and Historian and Research Associate at the Anthropology Department, Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center) presentation on 'Geography of Fish Skin Traditions' examined how the many uses of fish skin were devised by peoples who live in the pan-boreal, pan-arctic regions of the northern hemisphere, considered "ancient". But in most areas of this vast region, whatever the local landscape/seascape looks like now, it can be no older than several ten thousand years, since the end of the Pleistocene, when the most recent Ice Ages began to melt. John conveyed the processes and consequences of the age beyond the Pleistocene, as configured in the recent watersheds, the rivers, the geography of the northern boreal and Arctic regions. The guide was the cartography of Richard Edes Harrison, who did projections of sections of the earth, on their segments of the curved earthly sphere, as would be seen from space. John linked the many disparate endeavours of cultures and their uses of fish skin, as unified by the geography of the northern pan-boreal and Arctic world.

Isaac Raine's (Central Saint Martins) presentation 'Fish Skin Zero Waste Pattern Cutting' examined the tradition of piecing of skins to make garments and accessories and its relevance and application to contemporary fashion practice for improved sustainability.

Zhongjin Zhang's (Central Saint Martins) presentation Fish Skin Tanning Workshops at Chinese and UK Universities detailed his story in fish skin craft, and his amazing work as a recent student who proceeded to launch six workshops and disseminate this knowledge to over one hundred students since 2018.

The fieldwork, focus groups and conferences were closely followed by many members of the Alaska Native community through June's social media channels. Her online presence is a force of dissemination, as her great character, her adaptability and openness are a major factor in maintaining the life of Alutiiq craft and bringing it into the present day, not only for her culture but others. Her followers thanked June for bringing them, and all of their ancestors, with her on her travels. They all shared June's excitement as a Native Alaskan culture carrier in Hokkaido, meeting with elders, witnessing the fish skin culture of the Ainu people and comparing the uses of a similar material by different cultures in their own craft. They all noticed how many similarities there are to Indigenous peoples in the Arctic; not only the fish skin techniques but also the (basket) grass weaving (sharing the same twined technique) and Kaparamip Ainu embroidered robes. They rejoiced to see their cultures (Alutiiq, Nanai and Ainu) share their traditional knowledge with each other and with the wider Arctic community at large.

Since June's return home, she and a group of Native women from rural villages in Alaska were invited to the Rasmuson Museum in Anchorage to study and discuss stitches and the assemblage of a fish skin coat. Her extensive posts on this, and previous fish skin projects, have been enthusiastically received by her many followers and students. She truly is a force - disseminating information approachably and seemingly effortlessly. Thank you, June!

This field trip has inspired June and Anatoly to improve their own tanning methods by adding other ingredients to soften and whiten salmon skins. It was June's and Donkan's dream to connect face-to-face with fish skin knowledge keepers and artistic stewards of natural resources. It was my dream to help to make it happen. Not only these elders benefited, but also the museum curators who were honoured to meet and learn from these Native artists, the participants of the trip and online viewers of the conference. This conference has brought us one step closer to achieving the status of Fishskin Intangible Cultural Heritage.