

ALL OBJECTS OF PAST AND PRESENT

The Peabody Harvard Collection at the Museum of Cultures in Finland

In 1951, the National Museum of Finland obtained a number of Arctic ethnographic artifacts in an exchange with the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University in the United States. This small collection was transferred to the Museum of Cultures in 1999. During last year's research project, it turned out that the artifacts were collected at end of the 19th century, when American exploration and commercial exploitation of the Arctic was intensifying, and the major North American anthropological museums rushed to build up their Arctic collections.¹ This article presents some of the artifacts of the Peabody Harvard Museum collection in Finland and discusses themes of Arctic material cultures and the interplay of material culture exchanges between Americans and indigenous peoples.



Figure 1. The Alaskan snow-knife VK5471:16 has been turned into a work of art: the incised images pigmented in black show people dancing in a semi-subterranean house, men are holding wands in their hands and two men are drumming, while a man is kneel-jumping; below are hunting scenes where a hunter is shooting a caribou with a bow, a whaling crew has harpooned a bowhead whale struggling with two seal skin floats on the harpoon line, and a man is harpooning a walrus from a kayak. It probably made of walrus scapula bone. Length 33 cm, width 7.5 cm. Photograph National Board of Antiquities/Rauno Träskelin, 2014.

When Alaska was annexed to the United States in 1867, the government sent Army Signal Corps officers there to chart the new area for military purposes, but the men were also asked to collect ethnographic artifacts for the United States National Museum established only a few decades earlier.² The officers chosen were naturalists, who published later monographs on Alaskan cultures, notably Edward W. Nelson.³ Also important

universities like Harvard founded their own museums and anthropology departments, which helped to develop the Arctic scholarship, in fact famous anthropologist Franz Boas started his career with these collections and doing fieldwork among the Canadian Inuit.⁴ Boas entrusted commercial whaling-ships captains, Captain James S. Mutch as one, to collect Inuit artifacts.

From the indigenous peoples' point of view, this was an era of drastic change in their lifestyles, as they became involved in the business of commercial whaling, exploring or were affected by the epidemics brought by these strangers. Artifacts were collected by exchanging them for Western trade goods, such as glass beads, metal knives, and guns, which crucially influenced the Native material cultures.

THE FINNISH PEABODY HARVARD COLLECTION

The Peabody Harvard collection in Finland comprises some one hundred ethnographic and archeological artifacts from the Arctic obtained through exchange with the Peabody Harvard Museum in the US.⁵ This article focuses on the ethnographic artifacts. The artifacts reflect the US interest in that most are from Alaska, mainly from the Iñupiat (Inuit) and Yup'ik peoples, but some objects are from the Inuit in Canada and Greenland. These artifacts were collected by a number of persons from different backgrounds. However, the collecting went on within a tight-knit collection community directed by a few scholars and institutions in the United States.⁶

At the end of the 19th century, the connections between the museums, cultural institutions and universities were close and the artifacts flowed within this community. A central figure of the network concerning was Frederic Ward Putnam, the director and curator of the Peabody Harvard Museum from 1874–1909, who obtained Arctic objects from many sources both for the Peabody Harvard Mu-



Figure 2. This needle case VK5471:38 of a rare type is a tubular bone, probably the leg bone of a swan or goose, with a widening at the one end and a wooden peg to close it at the other. The needles were kept in the hollowed-out tube closed with a wooden peg. The designs are incised and pigmented in black and show the wings, head and legs of a bird. Length 11.70 cm, width 1.70-3.20 cm. Photograph National Board of Antiquities/Rauno Träskelin, 2014.



Figure 3. This walrus ivory fastener VK5471:44 is decorated with the circle-and-dot design. It comes from the Togiakamute, the Yup'ik living in Togiak on the Bering Sea Coast of Alaska. The sewing bag was made of skin and of a roll-up type, the fastener was used to keep it closed, but the decorations also made fasteners ornamental. Length 13.20 cm, width 1.20 cm. Photograph National Board of Antiquities/Rauno Träskelin, 2014.

seum, but also for the ethnological exhibit of the World's Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893, where Franz Boas was his assistant.⁷ Putnam was involved in developing other major anthropological museums, the University of California, Berkeley museum, the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago and the United States National Museum in New York.⁸

These connections are visible also in the provenance of the artifacts in the Finnish collection: 11 objects were taken by Putnam from the United States National Museum for the Peabody⁹, one object came from Putnam's department at the University of California, some are from his former students Vilhjálmur Stefansson and Franz Boas, and some of the Columbian Fair artifacts meant for the Field Museum that were taken to the Peabody.

The Finnish collection consists mainly of tools and hunting weapons: a harpoon, a quiver with a bow and arrows, a fishing tackle, tools for making nets, carving tools, women's needle cases and skin scrapers with others. There are also some domestic items, ornaments such as labrets, a human figurine and a full set of boy's clothing. In the following, a few artifacts are presented in more detail.

THE ART OF TOOLS

The "snow-knife of Central Eskimo type, from Alaska", referred to as "archaeological" in Peabody Museum's ledger was originally donated to the museum in 1903 by Curator Putnam himself.¹⁰ This item is a wide-bladed bone knife and covered on both sides with images, perhaps from the Iñupiat in Alaska. The snow-knife was probably first used as a tool and when its tip broke, it was re-used and incised with images. The lively images on both sides describe the lifestyle of the Alaskan Arctic Coast: hunting of bowhead whales, walrus, and

caribou, as well as fishing. The images are made using only black pigment, yet they capture movements and feelings wonderfully; the whaling captain's pride in holding up his paddle as a sign of the whale and then the joy of the entire community dancing to celebrate the successful hunt. (Fig. 1)

The artifacts originating from the collections of the United States National Museum are almost all collected from Alaska in the 1870s and 1880s by Signal Corps officers. The artifacts are mainly from bone, antler or walrus ivory. These hard materials have traditionally been carved by the Arctic men, who show their artistic flair in decorating the objects with incised designs and animal shapes. These functional tools are indigenous art, but their designs have also spiritual meanings, and they also reflect the gender relations in the Arctic cultures.

Needle cases, like many of a woman's tools of hard materials, were usually made by her husband. A woman's needle case (Fig. 2) is made of the leg bone of a large bird and is a good example of delicately decorated bone with a shape which inspired the carver. This type of needle case was only found in the region between the Yukon River Delta and the western part of Norton Sound in Alaska, and its peculiar shape and decoration intrigued Boas to write a research article in 1908, including an illustration of this very same needle case.¹¹ In Boas's opinion, this type is a very old needle case shape and

often represents an animal's body.¹²

In the needle case in question, the wide part of the bone forms the wings of a bird, its neck is incised between the wings reminding of a sleeping bird and the legs are also incised along the tubular part.

The women in the Arctic have excelled in working soft materials, processing skins, fur and sea mammal intestines which they sew into clothing which kept their families warm and protected from wind and humidity. A young girl made herself a sewing bag showcasing her skill with the needle to attract a husband; when she married, she never went anywhere without her sewing bag which was held shut by a decorative bag fastener of walrus



Figure 4. The skin scraper VK5471:33 has wooden handle which is shaped not unlike a modern ergonomic computer mouse. The woman would lay her wrist on the tail part, cover the round part with her palm and place her thumb into the groove at the side and her fingers into the indentations on top. The slate blade is loose in the picture, it should be fixed to the short front end of the tool. Size of handle 13.15 x 6.2 x 5.2 cm, width of blade 4 cm. Photograph National Board of Antiquities/Rauno Träskelin, 2014.



Figure 5. This seal drag handle VK5471:54 from Sledge Island is carved from walrus ivory and depicts a small seal, probably a ringed seal pup. The eyes were usually baleen inlay, but this one has metal, perhaps small nails or tacks obtained from the Americans. A hole is made to the belly and from here skin cord would have been inserted for dragging a dead seal back home. Size 25 x 1.45 x 1.6 cm. Photograph National Board of Antiquities/Rauno Träskelin, 2014.

ivory carved by her husband.¹³ This Yup'ik bag fastener (Fig. 3) was collected by Sgt. Samuel Applegate, one of the Signal Corp men. The fastener is decorated with a complicated version of the circle-and-dot-design, which is typical to the Arctic artifacts from Alaska. There are many interpretations of this design, but usually in the Yup'ik culture it is related to the concept of eyes, joints (the “eyes” of the bones) and spiritual awareness.¹⁴

There are other women's tools in the collection too, such as skin scrapers used in processing the skins. These were tools usually made of wood and provided with a stone or, later, metal blade. This northern

style skin scraper (Fig. 4) was ergonomically fashioned by an Iñupiaq man for his wife's particularly small hand. A well-made tool helped with the hard and precise work of scraping the skins, which was done several times during the process of curing the skins of animal hunted by her husband.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SEALS

The men's work in the coastal communities was hunting of sea mammals. Especially on the Bering Sea islands in Alaska, peoples' lives depended in winter and early spring on the successful hunt of walrus, bowhead whales or seals, and the lack of these animals resulted in famines. Men's hunting tools and equipment were made using materials from the very same sea mammals they hunted: from walrus ivory, whale bone and baleen, seal or walrus skin. The tools were decorated with carvings of sea mammals. For instance, seal decorations on the hunting equipment were amulets which ensured good (seal) hunting luck.¹⁵

When the hunter killed a seal, he pulled the heavy animal back to the shore over the ice using a seal drag, a loop of sealskin cord.¹⁶ These drags often had seal-shaped handles, like the endearing seal carving (Fig. 5). This seal carving was collected by E. W. Nelson from the Aiakamut Inuit of Sledge



Figure 6. A boy's summer suit VK5471:17- VK5471:18 is parka with inner shirt, trousers VK5471:19 and VK5471:20 (inner drawers) from Canada's Baffin Island. Boots, socks, slippers and mittens not shown. The hooded parka shows the beautiful ring-shaped markings of the ringed seal's back; the whiter parts are from the seal's belly and dark brown seal fur is added for contrast. The contrasting colored seal furs on the trousers makes a nice striped effect. In the hood and at the opening of the trousers, the white inner layer of seal pup fur is seen. Parka length 90 cm from hood to hem, sleeve-to-sleeve length 90 cm, width 56 cm; trousers length 63 cm, width 55 cm. Photograph National Board of Antiquities/Rauno Träskelin, 2014.

ing the famine.¹⁸ Bad hunting conditions could be caused by climate change, but by this time the commercial hunting of whales and seals by non-Natives had seriously affected the sea mammal populations, as well.

A seal hunter's clothing might be made of seal skin. The complete summer suit of an Oqomiut Inuit boy from Canada (Fig. 6) has a double layer hooded parka (coat) with matching knee-length trousers of seal fur, sealskin footwear and a pair of mittens. The clothing was obtained in 1902 from Cumberland Sound on Baffin Island by whaling-ship captain James S. Mutch working for Boas. Boas noted during his fieldwork in Cumberland Sound that the Oqomiut hunted both seal pups and basking adult seals during early springtime, and by first days of May they already had both kinds of skin for their summer clothes.¹⁹

Inuit clothing is designed to be both practical and beautiful. In the Arctic it has been common to wear a double layer of clothing for warmth. The inner layer of is placed with the fur toward the skin and the outer clothing the fur

Island.¹⁷ Nelson visited Sledge Island in the winter of 1879–80 and reported that the islanders were starving—next spring he found them on the mainland with other island groups fleeing

outside. Seal skin is the most practical material in summer conditions of wet snow and open water.²⁰ In the early summer, seals were napping on the ice and the hunter had to approach them crawling and pretending to be a seal. According to Boas clothing served as camouflage: “The sealskin clothing makes man and seal look so extremely alike that it is difficult to distinguish one from the other at some distance.”²¹ The hunter not only looked and moved like a seal, he would also imitate seal grunts.

This seal skin parka with a pointed hood and a slit in front was typical of the Cumberland Sound men in the late 19th and early 20th century—Boas thought this “the prettiest clothing” among the Central Canadian Inuit.²² A drawing of Baffin Island clothing from 1577 shows that contrasting color fur was used for effect, but the style with the pointed hood, front slit in the parka and the knee-length trousers have developed later.²³

In the summer, a hunter needed footwear suited for hunting on land or on the ice floe. His boots had to be warm, but also have a thick waterproof outer sole sewn with a water-tight stitch, so that he could tackle wet and dry snow or ice or gravel.²⁴ The Oqomiut boy’s summer footwear consists of three parts used together: the caribou skin socks were worn with the fur against the boys legs for warmth, the high outer boots had a waterproof outer sole, and the soft ankle-length seal fur slippers worn in between the sock and boot. Grass or feathers were also used for extra warmth and for keeping the feet dry, and Boas mentions that birdskin slippers were worn.²⁵

At the time when this boy’s summer clothing was collected, commercial whaling had started to affect the Inuit cultures and more Western style clothing was soon used.

HUNTING REINDEER

The most important land animal for humans all over the Arctic and Subarctic has been the wild reindeer (caribou in Canada and USA) over the last ten thousand years.²⁶ Reindeer provided meat, the antlers and bone were used for tools, the sinew for making sewing thread, and the skin was made into winter clothes, boots, blankets and dwelling covers.²⁷ Reindeer was most commonly taken with bows and arrows in the summer when skins were good for making warm winter clothes.

The bow case and quiver with a bow and 12 arrows (Fig. 7) was collected by the American Arctic explorer Robert E. Peary from his journey to Northwestern Greenland in 1891–1892.²⁸ His collection from the Cape York district was acquired by Putnam to be displayed at the Columbian Fair in



Figure 7. A bow (VK5471:1) and 12 arrows (VK5471:2-13) are set in bow case with attached quiver (VK5471:14). This rare sinew-backed bow is made from several pieces of reindeer antler attached with sealskin thong. The arrows have lanceolate heads of iron, copper or brass, and wooden unfletched shafts. The bow is placed in a bow case attached to the arrow quiver. This bow case-with-quiver is made of dehaired untanned sealskin painted with reddish color. The quiver has a small hood for covering the arrow heads. Length of bow 76.8 cm, length of arrows 54.1-59 cm, and length of case 82.60 cm. Photograph National Board of Antiquities/Rauno Träskelin, 2014.

1893 and to be later moved to the Field Museum.²⁹ However, when anthropologist James VanStone researched the Field Museum collection in the 1970s, he noted that two bows and a bow case were missing.³⁰ These “lost artifacts” were apparently taken by Putnam and entered in the Peabody Harvard Museum collections, and that way came later to the Finnish collection.³¹

The Peabody ledger gives these artifacts the provenance of “Arctic Highlands” and “Narkrassome” in Greenland.³² The “Arctic Highland” refers to the area of the Inughuit, the northernmost people of the world, earlier called the Polar Eskimo.³³ The Inughuit have lived in small groups in Northwestern Greenland somewhat isolated from other Greenland Inuit.

The first Europeans who made contact with the Inughuit in the early 1800s, mentioned that the bow was unknown among them.³⁴ In the 1860s a group of Baffinland Inuit from Canada moved into the Inughuit communities in Greenland and introduced (or re-introduced) the “forgotten” bow for reindeer hunting; this became common around the 1870s, but was suddenly replaced by guns in the 1890s, when the American explorer Peary arrived and paid with guns and other goods for equipment and services he needed.³⁵ Peary collected nine samples of bows for the Columbian exhibition as ordered by Putnam—“all objects of past and present”—not knowing that by his own actions he had effectively killed off a merely three decades long bow hunting tradition of the Inughuit.³⁶

Due to this curious history, the Inughuit bows do not resemble other Greenland bows, but are a secondary type of the eastern bow used among the Central Inuit in Canada.³⁷ Where driftwood has been scarce, the Inuit have made use of reindeer antler for the bow stave³⁸ –this way the animals they hunted also provided the weapons for the hunt. Also the arrows and bow case are of the Canadian type.³⁹ Due to lack of wood, many of the arrow shafts are made by joining several pieces of wood. The arrow heads are of copper, iron and brass, mostly traded from European explorers and whalers visiting the Inughuit area more frequently at the end of the 19th century.⁴⁰

THE COLLECTION IN PERSPECTIVE

The Peabody Harvard collection in the Museum of Cultures has turned out to be a snapshot into the lives of the Arctic peoples at the historical moment when they became entangled with North American and European global economy and politics.

The artifacts presented highlight specific cultural themes of the Arctic: the ancient elements of design side by side with new innovations, the technologies which are both practical and linked to spiritual understanding of the world, the tools that are forms of art, and items connected to family histories or specific places and events.

The context of collecting revealed that the devastating changes experienced today have already been set in motion at the end of the 19th century. The story of the Inughuit bow underlines the rapid changes caused by outside influences, whether Inuit or Western, and details how the act of collecting itself influenced the disappearance of certain object types.

Today, the Alaskan men still carve walrus ivory, only now they sell their art on the internet and must adhere to US legislation protecting marine wildlife. Whales are still hunted, though in ways and numbers specified by the quotas allocated to the Native peoples. Seals are known to carry significant loads of mercury in their livers. The Bering Sea Islands that experienced a famine during Nelsons visit have mostly been deserted as the Sledge people have long ago moved to the Alaska mainland. In Greenland, the Inughuit live now next door to the US Thule airbase worrying about nuclear radiation in their area. And global warming affects everything in the Arctic. All this is reflected in the changes and continuities of lifestyles and material culture: less people are able to subsist on traditional hunting, but the skills in arts and crafts provide some income, while with the soaring summer temperatures, the modern

Baffinland boy is more likely to wear a pair of jeans than traditional double-layer seal fur clothing.

The ideology of salvage anthropology which created Arctic peoples collections for the “white man’s museums” has given way to museums cooperating with indigenous peoples. Sharing of knowledge has become the new ideology in an increasing global world. In that spirit, placing of the digitized Finnish collection online is a small gesture of visual repatriation, an effort to make sense of the entanglements of the past and the present.

NOTES

- ¹ In 2014, I researched and digitized the Peabody Harvard Museum Collection at the Museum of Cultures in Finland. The artifacts had been sent with a list of the Peabody numbers, but without information on collectors. This data revealing the collection context was found in the archives of the Peabody Harvard Museum and the National Museum of Natural History.
- ² The Smithsonian Institution was organized under the name United States National Museum in 1846, now the museum is the National Museum of Natural History.
- ³ Amy V. Margaris and Linda T. Grimm, “Collecting for a College Museum: Exchange Practices and the Life History of a 19th-Century Arctic Collection,” *Museum Anthropology* 34, no. 2 (2011), 109, 112–113.
- ⁴ Columbia University in the City of New York, Department of Anthropology, “Department History, Franz Boas”.
- ⁵ The collection has a total of 97 objects, of which 56 are ethnographic and 41 are archeological objects. For more information on the artifacts, please refer to www.finna.fi. The archaeological objects are from the Peabody Harvard Museum Aleutian Expedition of 1948–49 and are not discussed here.
- ⁶ Cf. Margaris and Grimm, “Collecting for a College Museum”. This article discusses the Oberlin Museum Arctic collection also obtained from the same era and same collectors.
- ⁷ Alfred M. Tozzer, *Biographical Memoir of Frederic Ward Putnam 1839–1915* (Washington, DC: National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, [1935]).
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ During 2014 research project, a note “Putnam 5/88” usually showed in the US National Museum’s original ledgers where an object had been given to the curator of the Peabody Harvard Museum.
- ¹⁰ Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, collection online, original ledger, 66–67.

- 11 Franz Boas, "Decorative Designs of Alaskan Needlecases: A Study in the History of Conventional Designs, Based on Materials in the U. S. National Museum," *Proceedings of the United States National Museum* 34, no. 1616 (1908), 327 Fig. 6a.
- 12 Ibid., 336–337.
- 13 William W. Fitzhugh, Susan A. Kaplan and Henry B. Collins, *Inua: Spirit World of the Bering Sea Eskimo* (Washington, DC: the Smithsonian Institution Press for the National Museum of Natural History, 1982), 130–132.
- 14 Betty Kobayashi Issenman, *Sinews of Survival: The Living Legacy of Inuit Clothing* (Vancouver, BC, CAN: UBC Press, 1997), 197–199.
- 15 Fitzhugh and Kaplan, *Inua: Spirit World of the Bering Sea Eskimo*, 76–79.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 E. W. Nelson, "Eskimo about Bering Strait," in *The Eighteenth Annual Report of the American Bureau of Ethnology* (Washington DC: GPO, 1900), 20, 24–25.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Franz Boas, "The Central Eskimo," in *Sixth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1884–1885* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1888), 433–434.
- 20 Issenman, *Sinews of Survival*, 142–151.
- 21 Boas, *The Central Eskimo*, 483–485, Fig. 412.
- 22 Ibid., 554.
- 23 Issenman, *Sinews of Survival*, 142–151.
- 24 Ibid., 39, 50–54.
- 25 Ibid., 50–54; Boas, *The Central Eskimo*, 554.
- 26 Ernest S. Burch Jr., "The Caribou/Wild Reindeer as a Human Resource," *American Antiquity*, 37, no. 3 (Jul., 1972), 339.
- 27 Ibid., 362.
- 28 William H. Goetzmann and Glyndwr Williams, *The Atlas of North American Exploration from the Norse Voyages to the Race to the Pole* (NY: Prentice Hall, 1992), 200–201; Rolf Gilberg, "Polar Eskimo," in *Handbook of North American Indians*, eds. William C. Sturtevant and David Damas, Vol. 5, Arctic (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1984), 578, Fig. 1.
- 29 James VanStone, "The First Peary Collection of Polar Eskimo Material Culture," *Fieldiana Anthropology*, vol. 63, no. 2 (1972), 31–37.
- 30 VanStone, "The First Peary Collection," 40–41, Appendix I and II.
- 31 Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, collection online, original ledger, 136–137. The bow in Finland is not the one that was originally in this bow case "from Narkrassome", but another. The bow and 2 arrows from the bow case are still at the Peabody Harvard Museum.
- 32 Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, collection online, original ledger, 136–137. "Narkrassome" might be the settlement of Niaqornaarsuk

near Peary's campsite at Cape York, cf. map in Gilberg, "Polar Eskimo", Fig. 1, 578.

- ³³ Knud Rasmussen, *People of the Polar North, a Record*, ed. G. Herring (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trübner et Co., 1908), preface.
- ³⁴ Kaj Birket-Smith. "The Greenland Bow." *Meddelelser Om Grønland* LVI, no. 1 (1918), 7–8.
- ³⁵ Rasmussen *People of the Polar North*, 23, 32; Birket-Smith, "The Greenland Bow," 8–7; VanStone, "The First Peary Collection", 39–40.
- ³⁶ VanStone, "The First Peary Collection", 32, 39–40.
- ³⁷ Birket-Smith, "The Greenland Bow," 12–16.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ Cf. Boas, *Central Eskimo*, 502–507.
- ⁴⁰ VanStone, "The First Peary Collection", 39–40.

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