

Sakari Pälsi – Collector of Arctic Art

Shortly after the February Revolution in Russia, in the spring of 1917, the Finnish archaeologist and ethnologist Sakari Pälsi (1882–1965) started, with the financial support of the Finnish Antiquarian Society, a one-man expedition to one of the most distant corners of the Russian empire: northeastern Siberia. Pälsi was a specialist in the stone age cultures of Finland, and fieldwork among the arctic peoples of Siberia would, he hoped, give him synchronic comparative material, necessary for a more detailed reconstruction of the technological and cultural patterns of stone age societies all over northern Eurasia. Unfortunately, because of the chaotic situation created by the Russian (and Finnish) civil war, Pälsi had to face considerable practical difficulties on his journey. Nevertheless, he was able to fulfil at least part of his original plan, and, incidentally, he remained the last Finnish scholar to have done extensive ethnological fieldwork in North Asia.¹

Altogether Pälsi stayed two years in the Far East, though part of this time he had to devote to other than scholarly activities. He visited Kamchatka, Chukotka, Alaska and Japan, and made two longer stops in the north: one, in summer 1917, at East Cape (Kap Dezhnyov) in the region of the aboriginal villages of Uelen and Naukan, and the other, from spring 1918 to spring 1919, in Central Kamchatka at the village of Klyuchevskoye. In Chukotka he became familiar with the Coastal Chukchis and the Siberian Eskimoes, and travelling by ship along the Bering Sea coast he occasionally came into contact with some groups of Coastal Koryaks as well. In Kamchatka, where he actually worked as an improvised fur trader, he mainly studied the life of the Russianized Kamchadals, but he also made a trip to visit a group of Kamchatkan Lamuts living on the upper course of the river Bystraya.²

Despite the difficult external circumstances Pälsi achieved remarkable results. A brilliant observer and a master of verbal expression, he recorded with insight what he saw of the traditional life of the aboriginal peoples. He also made interesting observations concerning the intricate political situation created by the rivalry of Russian, American and Japanese colonial interests in the Northern Pacific. Pälsi was an excellent photographer, and his picture material remains one of the most complete photographic records of the region in the early twentieth century. Even more interestingly, during the summer of 1917 he made a motion picture, which, recovered by chance in 1976, contains unique information on both aboriginal and non-aboriginal everyday life

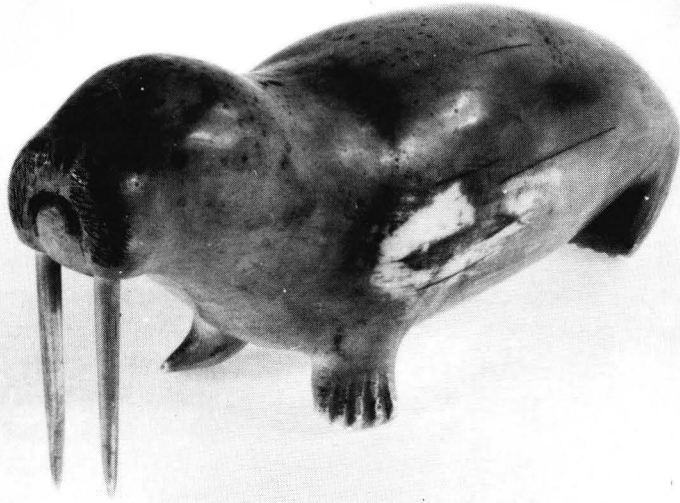


Fig. 1. Walrus, carved from walrus tusk by the East Cape artist Karlayrigin. Photo: Matti Huuhka, 1981. Suomen Kansallismuseo/ Finnish National Museum, VK 5794: 26.

as it was just before the October Revolution in the extreme periphery of Asiatic Russia. Finally, like all ethnologists of his time, Pälsi also considered it his duty to bring back to his homeland a collection of ethnographical objects. The most important part of this collection, today treasured at the Finnish National Museum, consists of samples of traditional artwork made by all of the five aboriginal peoples that he met in northeastern Siberia.³

Most objects in his collection Pälsi acquired by purchase directly from the aborigines. Although, for practical reasons, he was forced to limit the scope of his purchases, he managed to obtain representative samples of all the principal techniques used in the traditional art of the northern peoples. Pälsi was, rather exceptionally for his time, very well aware of the functional and technological aspects of art, and many interesting details in the artistic creation process were recorded by him both photographically and cinematographically. As comparative material he also accepted some objects of questionable artistic value, emphasizing the fact that even in »primitive» art there are different qualitative levels. For the same reason, his collection occasionally contains works produced by children. Specimens of unworked raw material and unfinished artwork are also present.⁴

Pälsi travelled in northeastern Siberia at a time when the traditional art of the northern aboriginal peoples was undergoing a profound transition. Until the end of the nineteenth century artistic creation in the north had invariably been stimulated by utilitarian purposes, either practical or ritual, and, in this sense, all art had belonged to the realm of applied art. Since the turn

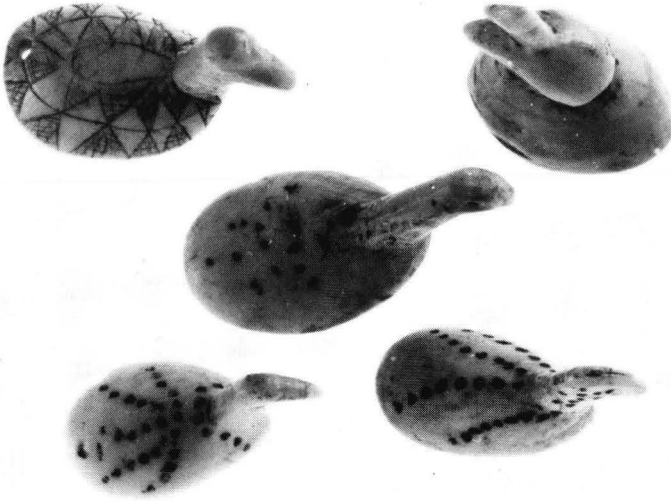


Fig. 2. Bone figurines of waterfowl, probably made by the East Cape Chukchis. Photo: Matti Huuhka, 1981. Suomen Kansallismuseo/ Finnish National Museum, VK 5794: 11–15.

of the century, however, art gained an increasingly independent status in the life of the northern peoples, especially as the regular visits of Western collectors from both the Russian and the American sides created a growing demand for professionally produced native artwork. This pattern of development was particularly characteristic of the Bering Strait region: here the ancient artistic traditions of the Chukchi and Eskimo peoples experienced during the first decades of the twentieth century a true renaissance, whose effects are still discernible today. It is not surprising, therefore, that the majority of works in Pälsi's collection derives from one or the other of these two aboriginal peoples, most notably from three semi-professional Chukchi artists known in Pälsi's rendering as Hyeittoohin (Hjeittuuhin), Karlayrigin and Roshilen. In contrast, the art of the Koryaks, Lamuts and Kamchadals is represented by more or less occasional samples.⁵

The standard items of Chukchi and Eskimo artwork are of two basic types: either sculptures or engravings. Most commonly made of walrus tusk, both types of artwork were already widely appreciated as souvenirs in the early twentieth century, and therefore rather expensive to obtain. Nevertheless, Pälsi was able to acquire some 50 walrus tusk sculptures, and at least five engraved tusks. Some of the objects were traded to Pälsi by outsiders, but in many cases he was personally able to observe the artwork being prepared by the native artists. The collection of sculptures, in particular, is representative in many respects, containing several fine examples of typical Chukchi and Eskimo motifs: figurines of walruses, whales, polar bears, and smiling human-

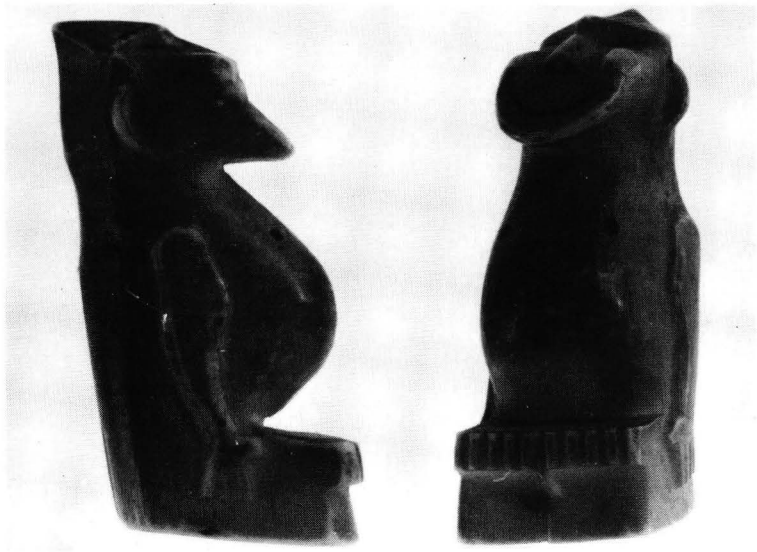


Fig. 3. *Pelikens*, probably made by the Siberian Eskimoes. Photo: Matti Huuhka, 1981. Suomen Kansallismuseo/Finnish National Museum, VK 5794: 32, 34.

like beings (*pelikens*). Because of its very age, Pälsi's collection provides an important source of comparative material to many later and larger collections, today preserved in the Soviet Union.⁶

In addition to the collecting of standard artwork, Pälsi made many interesting experiments with the native artists, thus obtaining material of both aesthetic and ethnological value. For instance, he had some engravings in Chukchi style successfully made on stone instead of bone. Also, as several ethnologists in northeastern Siberia before Pälsi had already done, he collected a large number of pencil drawings on paper, a method which enabled him to make rapid comparisons between different artists. Generally, Pälsi was fascinated by the ease with which the native masters went over from one technique or material to another. Pälsi's collection of drawings also convincingly illustrates the strong sides of the art of the northern peoples: masterful composition, and vivid depiction of movement.⁷

The largest number of objects in Pälsi's collection, approximately 140 items, represent various fields of applied art: tools, vessels, toys, vehicles etc. In accordance with his technological interests, Pälsi was especially attracted by various types of tools and the methods of their utilization. He wanted to fix the connection between the concrete utilitarian purpose and the formal aesthetic ideal probably underlying the visual shape of every object. His collection of applied art also comprises a number of ethnographical rarities: for instance, an Eskimo necklace with hanging miniature animal figurines carved



Fig. 4. Reindeer, fox, and polar bear, engraved on slate by Karlayrigin. Photo: Matti Huuhka, 1978. Suomen Kansallismuseo/Finnish National Museum, VK 4991: 155.

out of bone, a set of ritual firemaking tools of the Chukchis, and a unique example of armour made of wood, leather and iron, complete with helmet, quiver and arrows, and with surfaces richly covered with symbolic pictures in red.⁸

Because of his other activities, connected with Finnish archaeology, museum administration, travelling and popular writing, Pälsi never came to have the opportunity to undertake the scientific publishing of the results of his expedition. In popular form, however, he did present some of his personal insights concerning the geographical connections as well as the social and psychological background of art in the arctic. Anticipating modern circumpolar anthropological research, Pälsi emphasized the basic cultural unity of all arctic peoples. Perhaps even more importantly, he was one of the first scholars to draw attention to the laws of human perception, as manifest in «primitive» art. He also touched on problems concerning the relationship of art to the patterns of subsistence and social organization of the northern peoples. In the severe natural conditions of the north and in the isolatedness of the small aboriginal communities, art is, even more than elsewhere, a means of communication, and a source of mental power and psychic balance to the individual.⁹

Bibliographical notes

¹ For the life, work and literary production of Sakari Pälsi, see: Harry Halén (ed.), *Memoria saecularis Sakari Pälsi. Aufzeichnungen von einer Forschungsreise nach der nördlichen Mongolei im Jahre 1909 nebst Bibliographien*. Travaux ethnographiques de la Société Finno-ougrienne 10, Helsinki 1982.

² The whole journey was described by Pälsi in his popular travel book (in the Finnish language only): Sakari Pälsi, *Pohjankävijän päiväkirjasta. Matkakuvauksia Beringiltä, Anadyriltä ja Kamtšatkasta* (Excerpts from the diary of a northern traveller. An account of a journey to the Bering Sea, the Anadyr and Kamchatka). Otava, Helsinki 1919. New edition: Otava, Helsinki 1982.

³ For a general description of the ethnographical collections of the Finnish National Museum, see: Pirjo Varjola, *Suomen kansallismuseon yleisnografinen kokoelma*. In: Suomen Museo, Helsinki 1981, pp. 51–86.

⁴ Just one year after the appearance of his travel book, Pälsi published a popular description of his collection of arctic art (again only in Finnish): Sakari Pälsi, *Arktisia kuvia. Alkeellisia taideteoksia koillisesta Siperiasta* (Arctic pictures. Primitive art from northeastern Siberia). Otava, Helsinki 1920. New edition: Otava, Helsinki 1983.

⁵ A concise history of Chukchi and Eskimo art with biographical information on a number of twentieth century native artists including Pälsi's Hyeittoohin (Yettugi) and Roshilen (Roshilin) is presented in: T. B. Mitlyanskaya, *Khudozhniki Chukotki* (Artists of Chukotka). Izdatelstvo »Izobrazitelnoye iskusstvo», Moskva 1976.

⁶ A major Soviet collection with several works by, for instance, Roshilen (Roshilin), has recently been described in: (A. K. Yefimova and E. N. Klitina.) *Chukotskoye i eskimosskoye iskusstvo iz sobraniya Zagorskogo gosudarstvennogo istoriko-khudozhestvennogo muzeya-zapovednika* (Chukchi and Eskimo art in the collection of the Zagorsk History and Art Museum). Izdatelstvo »Khudozhnik RSFSR», Leningrad 1981.

⁷ For a detailed description of the two-dimensional art forms of the northern peoples, including materials on pencil drawings, see: S. V. Ivanov, *Materialy po izobrazitelnomu iskusstvu nadov Sibiri XIX – nachala XX v. Syuzhetnyy risunok i drugiye vidy izobrazheniy na ploskosti* (Materials on the pictorial arts of the Siberian peoples in the 19th to the early 20th cc. Motif drawings and other kinds of depictions on surface). Trudy instituta etnografii im. N. N. Miklukho-Maklaya, novaya seriya 22. Izdatelstvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, Leningrad/Moskva 1954, especially pp. 407–532.

⁸ Many items of Chukchi, Eskimo, Koryak and Lamut applied art resembling those collected by Pälsi, can be found in, for instance: (N. Kaplan), *In the land of the reindeer. Applied art in the north of the Soviet Union*. Aurora Publishers, Leningrad 1974.

⁹ For Pälsi's role as an innovator in psychological anthropology, see: Valde Mikkonen, *Sisäiset mallit alkukantaisten työkalujen ja taideteosten tuottamisessa: Sakari Pälsin käsityksiä* (Internal models in the production of primitive tools and artwork: Sakari Pälsi's views). In: Suomen antropologi 1982: 2 (Helsinki), pp. 60–66.