

# Shamans of Siberia – Magicians, Intermediaries, Healers

Linden State Museum of Ethnology, Stuttgart, Germany

December 13, 2008 – June 28, 2009

– in cooperation with the Russian Museum of Ethnography, Saint Petersburg –

«Shamans of Siberia – Magicians, Intermediaries, Healers» is the result of a collaboration lasting several years between the Linden State Museum of Ethnology, one of Europe's oldest ethnographic museums, and the Russian Museum of Ethnography in Saint Petersburg.

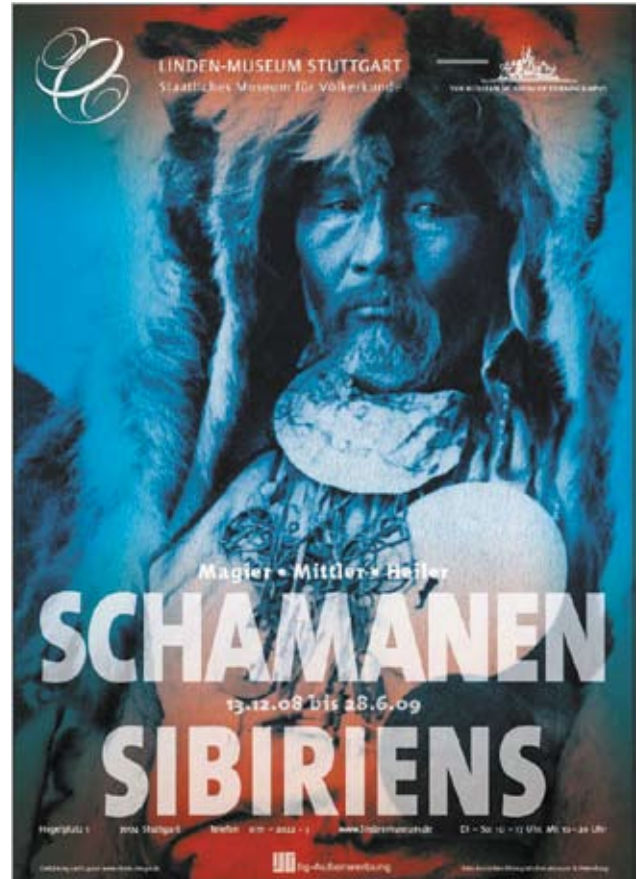
Curated by Erich Kasten, it is among the largest and most comprehensive exhibitions ever mounted on the subject. It features films, photographs, full-scale models of nomadic dwellings, and hundreds of artifacts including nearly 200 rare objects from the collections of the Russian Museum of Ethnography, many of them never before seen in western Europe. Instead of taking a static approach to shamanism as a historical phenomenon, particular attention is given to the dynamic features of shamanic worldviews, their openness to religious concepts of other peoples with whom shamans came in contact, and the consequent transformations and variations.

An important goal of the exhibition is to inform the museum visitor about non-western concepts of dealing with nature and the supernatural, whose representatives had to be consulted and treated in a respectful way. Early explorers and scientists viewed Siberian shamans

against the background of the respective Zeitgeist of their own cultures, and many continue to do so even today. Western observers first dismissed shamanic concepts as irrational beliefs during the Enlightenment, then viewed them in romantic transfiguration, and eventually – during the past 50 years – used them as an ideological tool for growing criticism of western civilization.

But how can we do justice to the phenomenon of shamanism from the point of view of the peoples of Siberia, for whom it has been an important part of their cultural identity? In the long wake of perestroika they are still seeking new ideological orientations and striving to reconnect to traditional worldviews. In contrast to a certain arbitrariness by which almost any kind of spirituality is often seen today as shamanic, this exhibition aims to show the particular historical and regional contexts from which shamanic worldviews and ritual practices evolved, within which they have been embedded in Siberia, and what shamanism can mean to people there today and in the future.

The overarching theme linking shamanic worldviews with traditional concepts of human relations with nature runs throughout the exhibition. The first section of the exhibition provides examples of particular natural environments of Siberia, establishes the historical and geographical context, and introduces the special character of sacred objects that are shown. In the next hall, overall concepts of human relations with nature and ritual interaction are explained by the examples of two different seasonal reconciliation feasts, the Yhyakh of the Sakha and the O-lo-lo of the Koryak (Nymylans). Specific shamanic concepts dealing with unexpected crisis situations are closely identified and demonstrated by regalia. Beautifully conserved sacred objects are shown side-by-side with archival photographs of them in their original contexts. Object installations focus on important themes such as becoming a shaman, shamanic cosmology, and the role of spirit helpers in traveling and communicating with the worlds beyond.



Ebner Design

After examples of earlier syncretisms and the disconnected transmission of shamanic knowledge due to anti-shamanic campaigns in the Soviet era, the Czech photographer Stanislav Krupar presents images of revitalized shamanic performances in Tuva in a slide show, while recordings of modern shamanistic rock music can be heard at a listening station.

As the shamanic ritual was crucial for the shaman's success, he or she had to be an excellent performer in front of the members of the community. Instead of showing (fake) scenarios of "real" shamanic séances that might only work in the proper natural environment of Siberia, a unique multimedia installation creates an interpretive experience through old and new technology. "The Shaman's Journey," created by anthropologist and media artist Thomas Ross Miller (Curatorial Consulting, New York) with the assistance of video producer Craig Campbell (Metafactory Studio, Edmonton), is a distinct aural and visual environment within the larger exhibition.



photo: A. Dreyer

Through video projections, special lighting, and 360-degree sound, the visitor navigates a passage between the twilight evocation of birds and animals and the deep night chanting and drumming of shamanic ceremony. Winter landscape photography by Hiroki Takakura surrounds the space of one room, while another is enveloped by fluorescent reproductions of paintings by Chukchi and Koryak natives, representing the cosmos and the spirit beings encountered by shamans along their paths. Century-old wax-cylinder recordings, contemporary field and studio recordings, and the atmospheric sounds of earth's magnetic field play continuously over 25 independent sound channels, creating an ever-shifting soundscape. Films include a slide show of rare early photographs and a wide-screen montage drawing on petroglyphs, landscapes, and

pure color to produce synaesthesia effects. This interlude suggests a transformation of consciousness corresponding to situations which might have been experienced and felt by attendants of shamans' ceremonies in Siberia in the past.

The main exhibition hall, covering two floors, shows particular shamans' personalities, sometimes with short sketches of their life histories, from numerous regions of Siberia. A Nanai artist now residing in Germany has elaborated the fish-skin clothing tradition of the Amur River peoples into a modern art style with a shaman's dress from that material and carved wooden art figures based on those used in shamanic rituals.



photo: A. Dreyer

Shamanic motifs in the walrus tusk art of Chukotka, from the first half of the 20th century, lead to recent work by Kamchatkan artists who continue this tradition in reindeer horn carvings. Here there is particular focus on the range and specialization of shamans of distinct Siberian peoples. Displays of art, artifacts, photographs, archival audio, and contemporary video depict particular variations in shamanic concepts, corresponding ritual dress and regalia, and different functions and tasks of the shaman.



photo: A. Dreyer

Another focus is how traditional shamanic views persist in the present, transforming into artistic and other realms in Siberia and the west. Siberian children's drawings reflect how the young generation perceives shamans today. Educational activities for the many groups of schoolchildren who visit the museum are designed to give them a better understanding of shamanism and important ideas for our common future. A special program complements the exhibition with music and dance performances by artists from Siberia, film events, workshops, and lectures. In the last hall, modern artists show objects, video installations, and paintings inspired by shamanistic themes.



photo: A. Dreyer

The organizers were particularly delighted to be able to initiate, in addition to the cooperation between museums, this promising collaboration including artists from Saint Petersburg and Berlin. Visitors to the exhibition see how young artists in Siberia are becoming increasingly interested in their own cultural heritage, using shamanic motifs and themes in their work, while young artists in the west draw inspiration from supernatural concepts of indigenous peoples elsewhere. They enter into a creative dialogue among different cultures and the spiritual worlds that the shamans mastered.

The organizers hope this exhibition may help people in the west, and perhaps even in Siberia, to rediscover and gain renewed confidence in this important cultural heritage amidst the difficulties of rapidly transforming cultures and communities.

*Erich Kasten and Thomas Ross Miller*

## Exhibition catalogue (in German)

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photo: A. Dreyer

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