

Heritage and/or Property: Ethnographic Collections in Russian Museums

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In recent years, many Russian museums have found themselves at the center of complex relations between indigenous peoples and historical societies with their anthropologists and legislation. The collections themselves, their interpretation, and the ways in which they are displayed, stored and cared for have all been at issue, along with the basic question of ownership. The ethnographic museum collections are now the subject of numerous ownership theories, property laws, different policies on export/import and ethnic principles. This article considers the ethnographic collections in Russian museums as they confront the complicated issues of ownership and possession. It presents the views of a practicing museum worker, and I emphasize that they are only my own personal opinions.

What ethnic principles and legal policies are being adopted in Russia with regard to the ownership of museum collections, forming an essential part of national culture? This issue confronts us with a multifaceted and even paradoxical reality, because it involves the interaction of two opposing doctrines, cultural nationalism and cultural internationalism. It is clear that in its relations with foreign states, Russia places great importance on retaining its national cultural patrimony within its borders. It follows, therefore, a policy of cultural nationalism. This is based on the idea that the country where cultural objects were made or found has the strongest claim to them, and that objects from the past form a constituent part of the state or national identity. This approach, implies that indigenous people are entitled to possess their cultural heritage, claim their material history, and retain many other cultural properties within their native regions. This issue may seem clear. Problems arise, however, when we look more closely at Russia, with its complex relations between the center and the regions, especially the national regions (regions associated with indigenous peoples living there).¹ Today many collections are kept in museums, which are mainly situated in industrial and cultural centers. Most of these are quite distant from the places where the items in the collections originated.

We do not have precise statistics on the number of ethnographic collections in Russia as a whole. We only have data on the number of collections in the specifically ethnographic museums. These do not show us the entire picture, because many other museums have materials similar in nature. The main ethnographic museums in Russia are located in St. Petersburg,

and both have extremely rich collections concerning the ethnography of indigenous peoples. The Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography houses more than 1,800,000 items from all over the world, while the Russian Ethnographic Museum contains nearly 500,000 items, mainly from the territory of the former Soviet Union.

Should all cultural items be kept within the areas where they were made or found? Russian reality demonstrates that this is not a simple question to answer. It has been the focus of active discussion in recent years because of the founding of the new independent republics (former Soviet republics) and powerful movements toward independence and cultural revitalization in the national regions of the Russian Federation. These complex relations have been part of the larger issue of relations between the center and the regions. On the international level, the center has adopted a policy of cultural nationalism. But on the national level, it pursues a policy of cultural nationalism toward the regions.

Russian legislation presumes that material heritage and the material past is owned by each nation, i.e., that nations own all cultural materials located within their territories. The problem with this approach is that in a multinational state with vast territories and numerous national problems, it is very difficult to achieve agreement on issues of ownership. Who, for example, has the right to collect items within a particular territory? And where should that material heritage be stored? Another difficulty arises in cases where objects originally made or found on the territory of one national region are now located within another national region, but one that is still part of the same state. Must they be returned? If so, under what authority? This paradoxical situation is acute in certain national regions where local governments have debated cultural sovereignty or proclaimed a moratorium on archaeological excavations.

Scholarship and the aesthetic integrity of monuments and their environment are the factors most often stressed by cultural nationalists. Cultural internationalists also argue on the basis of scholarly value. They believe that only the removal of items to well-equipped museums will provide an opportunity for thorough research, and that this is the only way to maximize knowledge of such items. Cultural nationalism is generally practiced by nations that are rich in cultural property, but where there is the risk that it might be removed and exported to more economically developed nations. This problem exists for Russia as a state, fearful that its cultural heritage will be exported to more developed countries. The dilemma also exists on the level of national regions within Russia, which risk having their most valuable cultural monuments and artifacts removed to urban centers and incorporated in the collections of Russia's major museums.

The policy of cultural internationalism is based on the assumption that mankind's common heritage transcends the interest of individual nations or cultures, and that many artifacts have a value that contributes to the common culture of humankind. This is a rather idealistic view based on the idea of a united humanity. As a policy, it is generally followed by industrialized societies with strong economies that are open to an appreciation of different cultures and to investing in culture. The argument is that cultural objects should gravitate to locations where they will be most highly valued and best conserved. Cultural internationalists are convinced that human culture, history and artifacts can be appreciated across the boundaries of nations and countries. But what kinds of cultural property belong in this category, and who will make the decision in such cases?

In Russia these arguments have often been used to support the removal of valuable objects and monuments to the mainstream museums, where they are adopted into the heritage of the "rescuer nations." Today such collections are considered to be part of the culture of their collectors as well as of their creators. The rescue/adoption arguments are put forward most forcefully by the major Russian museums in connection with certain archaeological or ethnographic collections. The conservation-centered argument conflicts, however, with arguments of an ethical or moral nature. From one point of view, it is preferable for the objects to be moved to where they can be cared for with adequate conservation methods. From another point of view, it is preferable for them to remain within their culture of origin, even if the best conservation methods are not currently available there at present. Only in this way can one pay respect to the ecological, cultural and intellectual environment in which the objects were produced.

Thus one of the difficult discussions now going on in Russia is between local and mainstream museums. The latter are older: they have more experience and better funding. The local museums, however, enjoy stronger relations with their communities. In many regions, local museums have become the main, or only, authority on cultural interpretation. At the same time, local museums suffer from a number of difficulties, including a shortage or absence of storage space, a low level of conservation and documentation services, etc. This prevents them from satisfying modern museum standards and from participating in the very strong competition that exists among the mainstream museums for the right of ownership of museum collections. But the weakest point of all for local museums, which has arisen due to the influence of cultural revitalization, is that they prefer to see particular ethnic groups as their public, instead of the population of the entire region in which they are located. This is a serious shortcoming that limits their activities and potential today.

Nenets case study

According to Russian legislation, all museum collections must be included in the State Register. Materials may belong to state or corporate museums, or they may be a part of private collections. This clear statement begs many seemingly simple questions about culture as property. Who has the right to turn culture into property, for example? The creators of this culture, or others? Who has the right to own this kind of property? The effectiveness of various approaches can be subjected to empirical analysis in the light of concrete examples. In the following case study, many of the values mentioned above come into play.

One result of the social and cultural revitalization movements of the 1980s and 1990s has been the growth of local and ethnic museums. These seek to preserve and share their cultural heritage, and to represent their own cultures in the mainstream museums. They also provide centers for the display and teaching of their cultures to benefit the members of their communities as well as other members of the public. They have arisen from the desire to create museums that better serve the communities in which they are situated. Those communities have specific features, but they are all in urban areas. A significant factor in the development of such centers is a growing pride in ethnic identity; people seek opportunities opportunity to access their past and to display their cultural status. The main financial source for such centers and their projects is local budgetary funding.

In this way in the town of Nadym in the Yamal-Nenets autonomous district both a House of Nature and an exhibition at the Aboriginal Craft Center were created. These became an essential addition to the Nadym Art Gallery. All such museums serve the inner city population but they also attract quite different people from villages and reindeer camps. The Art Gallery, established in Nadym by the city government, had failed to draw in these people. They told us that, for them, it was more interesting to visit the House of Nature and Craft Center, and that they preferred to have their children see those exhibitions as well. We are forced to recognize, therefore, that fine arts museums are really cultural centers that serve only the city population. For other sectors of the local population (in this case Nenets, reindeer herders, forming the largest ethnic community in the city of Nadym and also the largest ethnic community in the Yamal region), the museums of fine arts lacked significance and relevance. Such museums may address vital social questions and help people to develop a sense of their cultural identity and to learn about their history. They can provide an important focus for entertainment, artistic expression and the continuation of cultural traditions. But they cannot provide a vehicle for demon-

strating political and cultural perspectives, because they are more focused on the past than on the future.

The House of Nature was founded in 1987 to promote the ecological education of the local population in a context in which the gas and oil industries were developing rapidly in the region. Several years later two historical exhibitions were opened. The first was devoted to the years of Stalinist repression in the region, and the second to the ethnography of Yamal Nenets. These exhibitions reflect the way newcomers to the region (who need to identify themselves with the region's past as well as orient themselves toward its aboriginal population) have formed a united sense of self-consciousness. Images of the past and images of the other culture became the cornerstones of the exhibition.

The ethnographic exhibition is based on a quite diverse collection of items from the Nenets traditional culture, mostly collected within the last four or five years and reflecting the current situation among these people. Many similar items are still in use today at Nenets reindeer camps and in their villages. This exhibition was created thanks to the enthusiasm and initiative of the people of Nadym. The majority of items in the exhibition at the House of Nature are examples of traditional festive clothing, elements of reindeer-herding gear, household utensils, toys, and items used in fishing and trapping. The Nenets themselves are happy to display the same kinds of items, e.g. at their reindeer-herder festivals. Many of the newcomers to the North enjoy collecting examples of Nenets craft art; they use such items to decorate their apartments or wear them as decorations. Many of these items are routinely made for public show as signs of craftsmanship, hunter's luck and well being. This is why showing such items in a museum is not seen as an act that violates or offends the culture.

Among the ethnographic items on display, the most remarkable is the shaman's drum. Such cult items have always been special and rare in ethnographic collections of every rank, and specialists realize how difficult is to collect them. The drum in the collection at the House of Nature attracted our attention. The history of its acquisition is simple and symbolic. We were told the story in March 2001 by the Director of the House of Nature, Valentina Iosiffovna Drannaia:

The drum was brought by a Russian couple. They refused to introduce themselves or to leave information about themselves. They just said that they were geologists and had found the drum in the tundra. It was "just lying there," so they took it as a souvenir. The bad luck, which began shortly after this incident, they explained, was brought about by the drum. The couple decided to get rid of it by giving it to the museum; that's why they brought it to the House of Nature.

But the importance of a shaman's drum in Nenets culture is so great that, even without precise information and based only on a careful examination of its external physical characteristics, we can readily guess its craftsman. The drum had been in active use for a long time, as indicated by carefully applied patches on the rim cover. We doubt that the drum ever became useless and had therefore been "thrown away" by the Nenets. We spoke with some of the Yamal Nenets at their reindeer-herder camps, in the villages and among the urban people in Nadym. Neither Nenets nor newcomers (including those who have lived for a long time in Yamal and are familiar with the ways of the local population) could confirm the truth of the aforementioned story. All of them tended to believe that the drum was stolen, or "taken without permission." Unfortunately, the desecration of Nenets sacred sites has become quite common in recent years, and this is the subject of considerable public attention and dispute.

The fate of the drum reflects the difficult history of relations between newcomers and the locals of Yamal. It demonstrates simultaneously the neglect of the traditions of the strange culture and the desire and intention to restore it and attempt to understand it. This drum had probably been certainly taken by newcomers from a sacred sledge, which had most likely been left temporarily by the shaman's family at the family's sacred site while they were roaming from place to place. The Nenets would not have abandoned the drum with no owner, i.e. "left" it or "thrown" it away. Usually, after a shaman's death his possessions passed to his descendants. If the shaman had no descendants, his sledge, and with it figurines of his assistant-ghosts, was left at his sacred site, and his drums placed, together with a clapper, on his tomb.

This particular drum at Nadym's House of Nature is now safe and sound. We can only guess at what kind of tragedy its loss had meant for the shaman and his community. We asked a number of Nenets why nobody claimed the drum or asked for its return. The response of many was that it could not be returned, because improper use had altered and damaged its identity. From the Nenets viewpoint, the violent removal of a sacred item from its cultural context destroys the object, rendering its ownership unimportant. Displaying the sacred object in public, however, is totally contrary to Nenets traditions of how shamanistic possessions are used.

Russian women such as the director and other female personnel at the House of Nature touch the drum without any fear, taking it out of the exhibition case for us. But when asked if they would keep such an item at home, the women respond categorically: "No. Why take the risk? It could bring bad luck into our home."

I should mention that the drum, once it became an item in the collection, acquired a significant prior value and a new social history, one framed by the culture of the collectors. This new social history encompasses its earlier history as an old shaman's drum in the culture of its creators. Once taken out of its cultural context, however, the item had also been subjected to the culture of its collectors and preservers, reflecting their cultural development, just as it did that of the culture that originally crafted it.

Special qualities are attributed to the space of the exhibition hall and museum. Many Nenets agreed that having the drum in the museum was much better than if it were stored in the home of the strangers who had taken it away from them. As for newcomers, they tend to believe that storing the drum and similar cult items in the museum renders them safe; they argue that it neutralizes the negative influence of such shamanistic possessions on the people who live nearby, who neither share nor violate Nenets traditions. It is not unusual that the people who donated the drum held it responsible for their family's bad luck. This is why they had decided to bring it into the museum. It was impossible for them to throw away such an item. In this way museums are a unique cultural and social institution in a multinational society, playing a distinctive role in the creation of national identity.

This shaman's drum is recognized not as a relic from the past but, on the contrary, as a living part of modern life. Standing at this glass museum display case one experiences an especially intense feeling that shamanism (which for so long was interpreted as a remnant of the past and sign of backwardness) remains today very much an integral part of the life of the aboriginal people of Yamal. To include the shaman's drum in an exhibition about the contemporary life of the reindeer-herders of Yamal is to give shamanism a kind of rehabilitation; it is a recognition that it has cultural value, not only national but also universal.

Almost all the Nenets whom we asked knew about this drum, which is often called "The Drum from Nadym." At first the name had an awkward, offensive and unnatural ring to it. In part, this was because in Nenets culture a drum was never defined with reference to a landscape or location, but always as the possession of a particular person, the shaman. In the culture of the Nenets the drum was always connected with the personality of a specific human. Participants in the ritual felt that they were hearing, in the sound of the drum, the soul of the craftsman who had created this musical instrument, hearing the heartbeat of the shaman himself.

The specific item was intimately tied to particular people within the context of its own culture. Defining and naming the drum differently, with

reference to the landscape, gives us an indication of how its social function has changed. Nadym, which was founded in 1960 as a regional headquarters of the gas industry, is in no way connected with the cultural traditions and ancient history of the Nenets. A man walking down the street wearing an aboriginal parka appears quite exotic today. Simply due to its new cultural context alone, the drum no longer represents a specific person, but the culture in general. In viewing it, museum visitors encounter Nenets culture in general, so the drum has come to be defined more widely, in terms of the landscape. However, this is compatible with the dissemination of additional sacred information connected to the fate and history of the particular drum. Mere physical accessibility was not sufficient, and the new public was keen to obtain as much sacred information connected to it as possible.

Many Nenets experience conflicting feelings when they consider the fate of this drum. On the one hand, they are proud that the shaman's drum is on display in the town's most popular exhibition, where it helps to convey Nenets traditions. On the other hand, Nenets identify profoundly with the fate of this item, which they consider to have been stolen. They are confident that the drum itself cannot hurt anybody, but they believe that the owner and his spirits can severely punish anyone who breaks the rules for handling such ritual items. In the words of an aged Nenets woman from Nyda village:

Yes, there is a drum there. I haven't seen it and won't go there to see it.
For me, as a woman, it's forbidden to view or to touch such drums.
I'm not familiar with it. People say that the geologists brought it.
Well, it's better not to talk about it, the night is falling soon.

To insist on extending such a conversation is tactless. Who should know better how to handle these sacred items than the "Keeper of the *Chum* (tent)," which has the holy sledge standing behind it.

Shared culture

Conflict and debate over the ownership of museum collections arise when communities understand their rights relating to ownership and want to determine how the collected items are interpreted and exhibited. This does not mean that no problems arise when communities feel comfortable about all these aspects of the museum activities – because in such cases they still want to participate. The main conceptual focus in the local museums tends to be on the shared culture, one that is enriched by the unique qualities of each of the ethnic groups that constitute a community. The

local museums are associated with particular communities, and they may even serve as models for the larger museums when it comes to developing partnership and dialogue between museums and their surrounding society. Moreover, the term “share” (*delit'sia*) corresponds better to the Russian reality than does “repatriation,” which is a term coined within American museum and legislation practice.

The ethnographic exhibition at the Nadym House of Nature reflects a nostalgic attitude toward the past and the lifestyle that has been left behind. The exhibition presents a romanticized vision of the traditional culture of the Nenets. Only positive aspects of their traditional culture are displayed in the exhibition. This forces us to raise a question that is posed by many curators in Russian museums today: what is the value of intercultural interaction in the interpretation of the museum collections? It is understandable that many curators would like to avoid the difficulties involved in dealing with ethnic or local experts. Many prefer to retain full control over the collections and over their interpretation and presentation. For the majority of staff at Russian museums, the most urgent problem is to understand what kind of interaction will allow the museum to combine a scientific anthropological perspective with the beliefs of those whose culture is the subject of their interpretation. In other words, it is important to imbue academically-trained staff with empirical knowledge of the communities where the collection items were created or found.

In Russia the ownership of heritage (*nasledie*) in form of museum collections generally rests in non-aboriginal hands. What matters most is how the culturally diverse staffs of museums, educational and scientific centers are educated and employed. It is important to ensure that representatives of diverse cultural groups have access to the senior authorities in museums. In this way Russian museums can become truly pluralistic and capable of sharing the interpretation of heritage with those whose heritage it is.

Today the mainstream museums are coming around to a full recognition of the value of community-based museums and cultural centers. They have even begun to provide assistance to such institutions. But relations between the two echelons are not simple. Very often regional museums refuse or are afraid to accept the help of mainstream museums. Because of the intense competition between them, they do not want to see those large and world-recognized museum centers reap the benefits of enhanced reputation, money, and publicity. On the federal level it is therefore urgent that Russia develops programs to encourage partnership between mainstream and local museums to provide assistance in the management and preservation of cultural property, as well as in research and documentation procedures. Local museums, in turn, can provide the necessary models of coop-

eration and interaction with a culturally diverse public. Long-term loans of exhibition materials may not be possible in most situations, but may work in cases where the initiatives enjoy the financial support of territorial governments and sponsors.

The problem of the ownership of ethnic collections is a “conflict zone,” but even here progress is being made. Today’s museums must become instruments for cultural conservation, institutions that integrate the Western model of the professionally oriented museum with the traditional knowledge and practice needed to preserve cultural values and treat cultural material with proper respect. All peoples have objects of special cultural value and have created places and various means of storing and caring for them. Today there is a deep divide between indigenous conservation practice and Western museum practice. Access to the most valuable cultural resources (for example, sacred places) of indigenous peoples has helped many museums to enhance their collections. But the one side’s gain is the other side’s loss. For many years, most mainstream museums have been overly focused on the preservation of material values, rather than on the spiritual values of indigenous populations. But times are changing. I am pleased to say that my Museum – the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera), – is among the first museums in Russia to begin to implement this new principle in its work. The most shining example of such activity is in the relationship between MAE RAS and one of the largest Lamaism Dazan (monasteries) of the Aginsk District in Buryatia – “*Agun dasanai uere*.”²

Aginsk Dazan was founded in 1811-12, and construction of its stone temple began at the same time. On the great steppe dazans were not only religious, but also cultural centers that accumulated rich bodies of knowledge in philosophy, medicine, and botany, and were also educational centers. Aginsk Dazan was famous as a center for a variety of crafts (especially wood carving, which had roots in local traditions) as well as for book printing and publishing. It had a rich collection of xylographs and various monuments of religious and artistic significance. Aginsk Dazan had strong and widespread links to many Tibetan Lamaism centers, and housed more than 900 monks at the end of the 19th century. In the 1930s the Communist party, with its antireligious policy, launched a wave of repression. In 1938 the last 30 lamas were taken away by the authorities to the city of Chita, and their fate is still unknown. Dazan was shut down and its excellent library was burned. In 1940 troops were stationed there. There is some evidence that Soviet officials were impressed by the amount of cultural treasure that they found, and that they reported to higher authorities that those treasures might be worth acquiring for the state. As a result the

Leningrad Institute of Anthropology and Ethnography received an urgent directive in 1940 to organize an expedition and remove all valuable objects from Aginsk Dazan. Georgy Glavazky brought more than 1000 items to Leningrad, among them lama clothes, containers, cult sculptures and xylographs. All of these items were very well described and documented; they became the property of the state and part of the museum's collection. These items remained at the museum during the blockade of Leningrad (1941-1944) and they did not perish. They constantly attracted the attention of scientists, and many studies of them were published.

In 1991 the entire collection was given back to the Aginsk Dazan. The early 1990s was a period of cultural revitalization in the Buryat Republic, when many temples were reconstructed and reopened as functioning religious centers. The Center of Buddhists of the USSR applied to all institutions and organizations to return their original relics to the appropriate dazans. The Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera) of the Russian Academy of Sciences was one of the first organizations that decided to accede to this appeal. In two months the museum staff managed to arrange all the necessary documents. The collection was deleted from the State Register of Museum collections and returned to Aginsk Dazan. A special ceremony was organized to greet the collection when it arrived at the dazan, where the items again became a vital part of the culture. This event was very important for the museum too, because we recognized the new way of preserving cultural heritage. Unfortunately this remains a rather exceptional case.

The strongest argument the central museums have in their struggle over the ownership of collections is their ability to preserve the collections and their experience with cultural preservation. They are committed both to the preservation of material culture and preservation of the past. In the case of Aginsk Dazan, this pattern of preservation was very prevalent during the mid-20th century, as it was with other religious artifacts and monuments in Soviet Russia. Today, mainstream museums are gradually beginning to understand that their mission is to contribute to all aspects of preservation, and that this must include a concern for the continued survival of cultural traditions. The ethnographic museums were the first to understand how urgent it was to move away from object-oriented conservation and discussions about ownership, and instead to support and conserve the living knowledge, customs and traditions associated with those material objects, including present and future collection items (cf. Kasten, *this volume*). Museum preservation has to focus on the people and culture behind objects, in order to help living cultures survive. But the majority of mainstream ethnographic museums in Russia today are not well suited to

become tools for community development and cultural preservation. This is simply because they are not an integral part of everyday life in those communities. In addition, the communities lack the tools to control the museum's work in collecting, interpreting and preserving their cultural objects. Collecting by museums is seen as taking away cultural treasures and as a form of violence carried out by the powerful state center. To the present cultures, most of the museum collections no longer represent their heritage; they have more meaning to the culture of their collectors than to that of their creators. Of course, Russian museums today suffer from a lack of funding and they cannot ignore the commercial benefits to be gained from owning collections of world-class artifacts. This helps them to obtain grants and funding to help organize collection storage; and like museums elsewhere, they are keen to profit from exhibiting their collections.

There is no perfect model either for cooperation between mainstream and local museums or for cooperation between museums and their communities. But several developments are underway which are currently repositioning museums in modern Russian society, which will allow us to refocus our attention from the problem of ownership to the problem of heritage. Museums must shift their focus from the question of ownership to the creation of a *sense* of ownership. This is possible only by sharing power, control and information between collectors and creators, and by respecting traditional values and customs related to cultural resources (for example, access to knowledge, objects, sites and their use). Ethnographic field work is an essential way to observe and document cultural resources, local knowledge and practices related to the use of collections, all of which are essential for the care and preservation of cultural material. In their relations with communities on ownership issues, museums have to change the decision-making structures they use for conflict resolution.

Of course, much has changed over the last ten years in Russia. We have to recognize that regional and ethnic museums today have the power to effect changes. Local and central museums must unite to develop modern ways of preserving their collections, ways that allow the collections to become the heritage itself, to begin functioning as a vital part of the culture of their creators. The challenge for all sides in the museum field involved in discussions about culture as property is to create optimal conditions for the study, care and appreciation of culture for everyone.

Notes

- 1 In the post-Soviet Russian terminology used in this paper, "national" generally refers to smaller ethnic groups and their cultures, akin to Native American tribes in the US or First Nations groups in Canada. "International" refers to

relationships among the smaller “national” groups (or between the national groups and the central authority) within the enormous Russian Federation.

- 2 I would like to thank my colleague, Dr. Larisa Pavlinskaia – Head of the Siberian Department of MAE (Kunstkamera) RAS – for detailed information on the cooperation between MAE and “*Agun dasanai uere*.”