



19005 Coast Highway One, Jenner, CA 95450 ■ 707.847.3437 ■ [info@fortross.org](mailto:info@fortross.org) ■ [www.fortross.org](http://www.fortross.org)

---

Title: Russian Contributions to California Ethnography

Author (s): Elena Okladnikova

Source: Fort Ross Conservancy Library

URL: <http://www.fortross.org/lib.html>

Unless otherwise noted in the manuscript, each author maintains copyright of his or her written material.

**Fort Ross Conservancy** (FRC) asks that you acknowledge FRC as the distributor of the content; if you use material from FRC's online library, we request that you link directly to the URL provided. If you use the content offline, we ask that you credit the source as follows: "Digital content courtesy of Fort Ross Conservancy, [www.fortross.org](http://www.fortross.org); author maintains copyright of his or her written material."

**Also please consider becoming a member of Fort Ross Conservancy** to ensure our work of promoting and protecting Fort Ross continues: <http://www.fortross.org/join.htm>.

This online repository, funded by Renova Fort Ross Foundation, is brought to you by Fort Ross Conservancy, a 501(c)(3) and California State Park cooperating association. FRC's mission is to connect people to the history and beauty of Fort Ross and Salt Point State Parks.

## RUSSIAN CONTRIBUTIONS TO CALIFORNIA ETHNOGRAPHY

The cultures of the aboriginal inhabitants of the American continent (Eskimo, Aleut, Indian) were in the sphere of interest of Russian scientists from the 18th century. The ethnographical appropriations in the territories which in the 19th century were named Russian America and Russian California were accomplished in the process of obtaining the land, furs and gold by Russians. This process began under political and economic expansion of Russia in North America.

Peter I, in his historic conversation with the governor of Siberia, D. I. Chicherin, near Azov, expressed the idea about Russian movement to Mexico and California from North East Asia. <sup>(1)</sup> Peter I was the organizer of V. Bering's great last expedition. The information about the tremendous number of furs V. Bering brought with him to Russia from America resulted in the development of the Russian-American Company in 1799. Very soon this company obtained a monopoly in rights for trade in the North Pacific, and began to expand its influence to California in the beginning of the 19th century. The first Russian-American Company buildings were erected in Bodega Bay in 1809. The permanent Russian settlement of Fort Ross was founded north of the mouth of the River Slavianka as a result of Russian investigations in California. It was a trade and agricultural post.

Fort Ross is situated in the lands of Pomo Indians. In the beginning of the 19th century Indians were friendly to Russians, and Russians tried to support peaceful relationships with them in spite of complications in Russian-Spanish and Russian-Mexican politics of that time. Russian aims at Fort Ross were mostly agricultural; they tried to grow a supply of food for Novo-Archangelsk, the northern capital of the Russian-American Company. The population of Ross was busy with horticulture, wheat production, and cattle breeding.

The members of Russian round-the-world expeditions G. I. Langsdorff, V. M. Golovnin, M. P. Lazarev, W. P. Khrushchev, O. E. Kotzebu, F. P. Wrangell, the officials of the Russian-American Company P. S. Kostromitinov and K. T. Khlebnikov, and missionary I. Veniaminov demonstrated deep interest in the ancient culture of the California Indians. All of these men left us diaries, letters and books with informative descriptions of the characteristic features of the various cultures. Many of them collected ethnographic objects which now are stored in the museum of Anthropology and Ethnology in Petersburg.

The great amount of excellent artifacts are now kept in the American Department of the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology (MAE) in Petersburg. Among them are the most outstanding California ethnographical objects which formed collection N 570. The biggest part of that collection represents objects collected by I. G. Voznesenskiy in 1840-1841 in California. Included are a series of baskets, feather regalias, bows, arrows and necklaces which came from Pomo, Miwok, Patwin and Wintu Indians. Among the baskets in the collection are waterproof baskets. California Indians, especially Pomo, are considered to be among the finest, most diversified and versatile of the world's basketmakers. The Pomo excelled in coiled and twined baskets made for a variety of practical and ritual functions. The quality of weaving is very high, perhaps the highest in North America. The famous feather-covered coiled baskets were very precious among the Indians, and it was difficult for Russian scientists and collectors to obtain them, but they did. Some of the baskets are decorated with shell and colored glass beads.

Basket N 570-94 is one of the rarest and oldest in the California collection of MAE. It was collected by V. M. Golovnin in the 1820's as it is stated in the museum list of objects. <sup>(2)</sup> V. M. Golovnin appreciated the California Indians' weaving very much. He wrote, "In my collections of rarities I have many things done by Indians. For example, baskets of grass and roots which are so skillfully done that they are waterproof. Indians cook meal in the baskets with hot stones." <sup>(3)</sup> We can cautiously suggest that the woven basket (in Russian I'CAT) used for carrying acorns, and the tray represented in the drawing in the book by L. Choris are the objects which were donated by I. F. Krusenshtern and F. F. Lisianskiy to the Museum of Ethnography in Petersburg after their return from the round-the-world expedition. These baskets can be compared with I'CAT in the collection and with a bowl N 570-101 or N 570-105.

Russian naval officer and Decembrist D. I. Zavalishin, and employee of the Russian American Company K. T. Khlebnikov, also were deeply interested in California Indian ethnography. In the personal collection of D. I. Zavalishin was a highly precious woven California Indian belt. Now it is impossible to identify which belt among the California collection of MAE belts belonged to Zavalishin.

The expedition of I. G. Voznesenskiy to Russian America was a whole new epoch in Indian ethnography. Voznesenskiy supplied MAE with unique ethnographic objects and a large series of items describing the material and spiritual culture of Indians. As a messenger of the Russian Academy of Science he worked as zoologist, biologist, botanist and ethnographer. Also he was an artist and he made detailed drawings of zoological specimens and ethnographic notes. He worked in California in 1840-1841, the last years of the existence of Fort Ross. Three broad ethnographical collections are associated with his name in MAE. They are collection N 570, 620 and 2520. Voznesenskiy tried to collect ethnographic objects according to scientific instructions prepared for him by members of the Academy of Science. These instructions contain a program of scientific collecting of series of objects. One of the most fascinating series in Voznesenskiy's California collection was the collection of baskets. As a collector he was interested in all kinds of baskets for cooking, ceremonial use, and those used for carrying loads. He was also interested in weaving as an art. He collected unique Indian belts of grass and a model of a tule raft.

Voznesenskiy was a famous collector. Due to his collecting activity we now have in the MAE a small series of ceremonial feather regalia of California Indians represented by two costumes, condor and raven cloaks. The raven cloak was used by impersonator of Kukusu, the creator of earth and human beings in Pomo, Patwin and Miwok mythology (570-1). Another costume belonged to the impersonator of Mollok, thunder diety, elder brother of Kukusu, condor, who inspired him to create the universe. The cloaks were accompanied by feather headdress, decorated hairpins, bands done of woodpecker feathers, and feather aprons. Voznesenskiy collected a series of these objects also.

The following is an account of the history of collecting these unique cloaks. A. G. Rotchev, the Governor of Ross, introduced Voznesenskiy to Captain J. Sutter who had a rancho in the valley of Sacramento. Sutter invited Voznesenskiy to visit his rancho New Helvetzia. Sutter helped him to obtain very rare feather regalia, cloaks of Kukusu and Mollok, from among the Indians who lived in the valley of Sacramento. Voznesenskiy wrote in his diary, "I found a lot of various interesting things in the field of natural history, and with the help of Captain Sutter, gathered rather rare ethnographical objects."<sup>(5)</sup> To obtain the cloaks was a really difficult enterprise because Indians were very jealous with feather ceremonial cloaks and other regalias, especially regalias made of condor skin. They did not want to sell them to anybody.

Even in the epoch of Voznesenskiy condors were rare. It is one of the largest flying birds in the world. It weighs 10 kg and the length of the wings is about 2 meters. As paleontologists state, the area of the condor in America in the past was broad, from the north of Florida to California, the Pacific Rim of North America up to Canada. Today it is possible to see condors only in parks. The history of the condor in America is deeply connected with the history of humans. In the south of California the condor is the sun diety, in central California its image is associated with the creator of the Universe. You can imagine now the motives for Indian behavior at Fort Ross when Voznesenskiy took out ceremonial cloaks before them in his room. They were frightened to death and ran out. He described that episode in his diary, "When I put the cloaks by Mollok and Kukusu on the bench, Indians ran away with the shouts of 'devil'. They were astonished how I can stay with feather costumes in my room because devil itself lives in them. They considered me to be a shaman."<sup>(6)</sup> Voznesenskiy succeeded in obtaining the whole costume of Mollok which was accompanied with a feather apron (570-3) made of eagle feathers and high headdress (nn. 570-3 or 570-6).

The first Russian scientist who paid attention to the feather regalia of California Indians was G. I. Langsdorff. He felt happy when he became a witness to Indians preparing the ceremony. He saw how they put on their regalias on the bank of the river. In his notes Langsdorff enumerated the ethnographic objects he collected in California. He mentioned "another headdress of vulture feathers (Vultus anreal)."<sup>(7)</sup> On the plate in his book, where ethnographic objects were drawn we can see a tall feather headdress very like the headdress in collection 570. It is headdress n.570-4. Now it is among the Indian items from California in the MAE.