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Voznesenskiy Collection: Blankets and Feather Mantles

Submitted by Elena Okladnikova

Traditionally supposed that the history of American collections of the Museum of Ethnography and Anthropology of Peter the First (MAE) is exclusively connected with the history of one of the most ancient museums in our country. In California, ethnographical specimens are scattered in a series of collections (568, 570, . 620, 1998, 2673, 4291). As one of the most precious parts, they are included in the large collections of the American department of the museum. On the one hand, these collections are closely connected with the history of Russian Academy of Science, and on the other hand, with the history of Russian America and Fort Ross.

There are some stereotyped aspects in estimation of the objects in MAE American collection. These aspects are stipulated by tradition that is based on the mistakes and inaccuracy of the first registrars. This article is devoted to the reconsideration of one of such estimations, concerning the feather mantels of the J. Cook collection.

Both of them were done from the feathers of American Duck (Anas

Americana). Together with the three other mantels, made of the fur of the otter, they were defined as Tlingit or Chilca blankets. This definition caused the registrars to put them in the American collections of MAE. (col. N,2520). A note was made in the inventory that all of them originated in the J. Cook's collection. It means that the blankets belonged with the earliest received items of the museum. There were no other documents in the inventory except these notations. All the information for the inventory came from the catalog of O. Belaev, card catalogs by K.K. Gilson and old labels.

The interest in the ethnography of the aboriginal population of America occurred in Russia in the times of Peter the First, so such an early appearance of American ethnographical effects in Peter's "Kunstcamera" was not surprising. The information about North American appeared in several newspapers of the Peter the First's times "Vedomosty", "Russian Vedomosty", and others. For example, on November 25, 1750, in "St. Petersburg Vedomosty" editor M. V. Lomonosov published an article entitled "The News about the English and French Settlements in America".

The geographical discoveries of Russian sailors were closely connected with the political and economical interests in imperial foreign policy. They stimulated the scientific research works of famous historians, G. F. Muller, for one. In his "Outlook of Marine Voyages in north sea (or cold sea) and Eastern Sea, executed from the Russian Side" Muller outlined the idea about the

outstanding and valuable contribution of Russian sailors to the world science about the Earth. He mentioned V. Bering's voyage, and its instigator, Peter I. The success of the first voyage dictated the necessity of organizing the Second Great North Expedition in 1741. In 1725 Peter I wrote the instructions for Bering. They forced Bering to move along the NA coast up to Mexico and California. Peter was thinking about the political and economical goals of Russia: competing with the Spanish crown as a presence on the American coast, and accumulating the legendary Mexican gold. V. Bering and his crew never reached California but reached the north coast of NA and "investigated the islands which lie between Asia and America". This expedition became the first complex scientific expedition on the Northeast of Asia. It put the beginning of the academic investigations in American, thanks to the activities of G. Stellar.(9)

In later times, after Bering's voyage, the journals and newspapers in Russia periodically published the information about the occurrence in "Kunstcameras" of the ethnographical items. (10)

The information about coming to the museum of the first NA items was published in one of the earliest old museum catalogs, compared by O. Belaev. Particularly, Belaev announced ethnographical items from the so-called J. Cook collection coming to "Kunstcamera" in 1780 and 1782. English seafarer J. Cook, on the two ships "Resolution" and "Discovery", undertook three around the world sailing expeditions. The third of these was devoted to the definition of the location of the coast of North America. It was



during this expedition that the large ethnographical collection was obtained. (11)

According to Belaev's catalog, the items from Cook's collection came to the museum in two parts. The first was sent in 1780. "On 1780 under the aegis of the high enjoin various curious thing from Kamchatca and the costumes of several american tribes were presented to 'Kunskamera' by premier-major Buhm". (12) The items from the Cook collection were transported to museum by mediators. One of them was premier-major K. Buhm. He was the man to whom the successor of the late Captain Cook, Captain Klerck, presented the collection as a sign of gratitude for the Russian hospitality. In winter 1780, Buhm brought the items to St. Petersburg. In the journal of the museum it was noted: "Under the aegis of the high enjoin major Buhm delivered to Kunstcamera various Kamchatca's items and the handicrafts of american tribes. Buhm arrived in St. Petersburg on February 1780. Cook's squadron returned to England only in August 1780. The things mentioned before were acquired by Cook on the islands, particularly, Sandwich Islands. These things were the first that reached the Europe." (13)

The second mediator who passed to Kunstcamera the last part of Cook's collection was Prince A. A. Vaysemkiy. " His majesty Aleksan Alekseevich Vaysemkiy donated to the museum various curious things collected by famous traveler Captain Cook. The things came from the land of Chukotka and other islands between Asia and American", as noted in the catalog of O. Belaev. (14)

Most of the items brought by Buhm to Petersburg were objects from the island of the south Pacific. The contents of the collection distinctly proves this statement. The majority of that collection is now stored in the department of Australia and Oceania of MAE. Among the items which came through the hands of A> A> Vaysemkiy were of native North American tribes. So the items from the Cook collection were put in different departments of MAE. (Let us call them the "Hawaiian" and "American" collections). The largest, Hawaiian section was registered as Col. N 505 and the other as Col. N 2520. Five "mantelets", two of which were woven from the duck feathers, were in the last collection. In the list of objects done by R. S. Rasuymovski in 1964, all the mantelets were designated as Tlingit or Chilcat blankets. Indeed, only three of them are real Chilcat blankets. They were woven of wool and otter fur (Col. N 2520-5, 2520-6, 2520-7).

In the list of items by K. K. Gilzen in 1911-1915 is said that the mantelet N 2520-5 was prepared by Tlingit Indians from the down of the wild goats and decorated by fringe. There was a label on it that was prepared from the old card, in the style of the labels on the items from the Cook Collection, which had the number "4" and an inscription in brown ink: "a blanket of otter fur. Aleuts." Selish Indians produced classical fur blankets. The strips of bark were used as the basis of weaving. The fur or the strips of down overlapped them. Ph. Drucker described the blankets of the Makah Indians, who borrowed the art of weaving blankets from the Selish, in the following: "A robe of duck down, collected from the Makah,

who learned to make such textiles from their Salish neighbors. The warps, which run horizontally as the specimen shows, is made of bark fiber into which quantities of down were caught. The widely spaced cedar bark wefts are not visible, being concealed by the down. The predominant color of the robe is the rich soft brown of mallard down, with a few strips of white. It is remarkably light in weight, soft and warm."

F. P. Lutke in ethnographical description of the life of the Tlingit Indians stated: "Indian women are very skillful in weaving blankets from goat's down. They also weave hats from roots, and many colored working baskets which are very light, tightly woven and could be profitably sold in California." The trading connected the north and south parts of the coast. Baskets were not the only trading items. Indians highly estimated shells and mantelets. But the techniques used differed greatly. Northern cultures preferred wool and fur or down while the peoples of California made their blankets of grass, towing ropes and duck feathers.

The mantles N 2520-8 and 2520-9 look like the Chilkats blankets because of their rectangle forms, but they were made of the feathers of American duck. They have two white stripes on both ends and a grey field between. They are double sided. In special editions devoted to Cook's collection, the mantelets were designated as North American Indian blankets. The leading specialist on Cook's collection, L. G. Rozina, identified them as traditional Tlingit design (17). Other specialists of Cook's



collection have corroborated (18).

After close investigation of the California collection of MAE and the collection N2520 particularly, I am hesitant to affirm the truth about the identification of the feather mantelets from that collection. It seems doubtful that all the objects from that collection are connected with the name of J. Cook. The majority of that collection came from I. G. Voznesenskiy who collected from among the Indians of northwest coast of North America, the Aleuts, and citizens of Kodiak Island. The information about Voznesenskiy as a collector of the N2520 collection could be found among the documents which accompanied the items and in the article about them by R. V. KINHZAlov (19).

Voznesenskiy's important scientific activity was connected with the Russian Academy of Science. He came to the Academy when he was a 5 year old boy, as a pupil of an assistant zoologist. The boy was talented as an artist. In his youth, he took part in an expedition to the Caucasus. In 1839 he joined the crew of the Russian expedition that sailed around the earth. He collected zoological, botanical and ethnographical examples in America. (20)

He landed at Fort Ross in the beginning of the summer 1841. His subsequent investigations produced zoological and botanical collections which are now stored in the Archive of Academy of Science in Petersburg. The names of the plants and animals were written in Latin, Russian and "Indian", according to academy



instructions. He was assisted by several people in gathering the specimens, one of them being a young missionary named Tijos. Tijos presented Voznesenskiy with the following gifts: a "kala", a kind of belt which the native chiefs wore during ceremonies (worth 25-30 piasters amongst the Spanish, a high price at that time); a "sipek" or man's hair pin; an "alock" or earrings; an "uegalku", an "Indian boa or woman's hand (or hair??) band. (These are the native words for the items.)

The information written above was done by Voznesenskiy in a list (N Y111) which is now stored in the archives of the Academy of Science and in a letter to F. F. Shrader from 16 February 1841. Shrader was the curator of ethnographic cabinet of the Academy of Science. The belt was done in the same techniques as the mantles, the feathers believed to impart sacred power to the wearer. Voznesenskiy wrote: "This thing was highly appreciated by the Spanish (Castilian) and European travellers because the indians did not want to exchange such a skillful work for livers of glass beads or blankets. Approximate cost of this present is 30 piasters or 150 rubles." (22)

Another donation to the Russian Academy of Science was made by a Mr. Forsman who Voznesenskiy met in Sitka, Alaska. Forsman became the governor of the Kuril Department of the Hudson Bay Company and sold a botanical collection to the Russian scientist. This included belts of grass towing ropes and feathers. In the list N.Y111 Voznesenskiy mentioned his bargain in the following way: "Two

Indian belts, very precious because of skillful work. Made in the Baja California. Presented in Sitka by Forsman." (24) Probably these belts are now stored in the collection N 570 of MAE.

In the first months of his stay at Sitka, V. made acquaintance with two other persons who helped him in his ethnographic investigation. One of them was Captain John Sutter, the owner of the rancho east of Ross, in the valley of Sacramento, in California. Sutter invited V. to his ranch, New Helvetia, which was located on the lands of the Nisenan Indians. Nisenan were the trading partners of the Maidu tribe. It is remarkable because Maidu and their close neighbors, Konkow, were the most skillful in weaving the feather mantles. During the stay with Sutter, Voznesenskiy bought from him the collection of ethnographic objects. He made a list of his acquisitions, which included the costume from Canada, items from British Columbia and from the Maidu. The list, numbered VI, is the earliest (dated March 1841) enumeration of objects collected by V. and is now in the archives of the Academy of Science at Leningrad (Petersburg).

Voznesenskiy wrote: "On the lands of Captain Sutter during the visit to indian village on the bank of Sacramento River I saw the shaman costumes. Captain Sutter helped me to purchase the costume for the ethnographical cabinet of the Academy:

A. Kukshuyi (in cossomness language) - an indian costume of raven feathers, a kind of parka, used in ceremonies. The cloak was sent on the ship Vancouver 1842. N.32. 12 arshins of calico were paid for it.

B. Molok. The person who is dressed in this cloak is called 'diabolo' (devil) during the ceremonies. The costume was traded for one thread of bugles from Rio de Janeiro and 1/4 funts of motley glass beads." (24)

According to the information in this list, Sutter sold to Voznesenskiy some other things:

" 1. The head band, Suisun tribe. The list N VI. States its value at 1/2 piasters.

2. The mantle of duck feathers.

3. Hair pin, also from Suisun tribe, named (sipeck), decorated with woodpeckers' scalps. List NVIII. Estimated at 3 piasters.

4. Two quivers, with a bow in each. The quivers made of California fox skins.

A. Quiver N 29, mentioned in the list of 1842, has 20 arrows in it and one bow. The arrows are from 9 different tribes.

B. The quiver, N14. Bow N15, mentioned in the list of 1845, contains 25 arrows, from 18 different tribes. Both quivers are estimated at 6 piasters." (25)

So, the first information about the mantles made of duck feathers is given in the list Number IV of 1842. The mantle was mentioned among the ethnographical items bought by V. from Sutter. In the other list of 1842 is the same information but may be more variable:

"N2. Mantle made of the feathers of American duck (Anas



americanas). N7. Estimated at 5 piasters." (26)

The mantle made of the duck feathers is mentioned in the list NVIII. This list was prepared by V. in Petersburg. It said:

"N6. Cloak or a kind of blanket, made of American duck feathers (Anas americanas). Suisun indians. N 7." (27)

K. K. Gilson, in his general catalogue of Voznesenskiy ethnographical collections, mentioned this mantle in 1917. (28)

The second person who rendered assistance to V. in collecting was the governor of Fort Ross, A. G. Rotchev. Voznesenskiy was fond of him and described his warm feelings in a letter to F. F. Brandt dated May 1, 1842. (29)

Rotchev helped V. to obtain the second feather mantle. The information is in one of the preliminary lists which was lost for some time among the papers of Voznesenskiy. Being a personal list of the items donated by Rotchev, it has never been published:

"N 16. Maglal. Feather head dress. It was put on the top of the head by indians.

A. (From Kachlemt) the white pelican.

B. Maglal. The white feathers were colored by juice of alder tree. This maglal consists of the feathers from different birds.

C. Kchai. Done from raven feathers.

W 19. Kubonu. This is another garment worn by women during ceremonies. Bodega indians or tundra indians made it.

Severnovskie do not know how to make them.

N 29. Kalaiy. The head net of feathers.

N 22. Hadita. The hair pin. Three items. It was used for fastening the head attire. Kayakaliy. In Russian, bearberry, a tree grows in the vicinity of Ross.

N 24. Shimamudria. The bird bones which they use as earrings.

N 25. Ishi. The bones (probably for hair pins used as gambling bones or for earrings). A - female, B - male. Ammam. The name of an animal (a hare), the fur was used for making the mantles.

N 27. Kudta. The necklace of indian work made of shells they call kidta. Widely used.

N 28. Ie-che. A sack.

N 30. Chottokiy. The play with sticks, 46 items.

N 31. Akka. Four bones used for gambling game.

N 32. Moo. The ishkat without the bottom in which they beat up ucha.

N 34. Batnu. A scoop for preparing ucha.

N 35. Kol. Ishcat without the bottom. A stone is put under it to pound ucha.

N 37. Uchusham. Sieve for sifting ucha.

N 38. a,b,c. Chidu. Ishkats for serving meal.

N 39. Ucha. The main indian meal.

N 40. Ottoko. Sea cabbage. The indian delicacy.

N 41. Nalolon. The head of the wild goat, worn while hunting goat.

N 42. Ualliy. Indian spears used for hunting goats and other wild animals.

N 43. The ishkat of Columbian Indians.

N 46. Nukkul. The pestle used to pound wild barley. Kchabe. The stone used by severnovskiy indians. These pestles are precious and rare.

N 47. Mass. The quiver. Made of the skin of an animal named Nuiy. There are 20 arrows in it. Arrows are called 'shisu', the bow, 'shegmi'." (31)

So, as it is mentioned in the list of items presented to Voznesenskiy by Rotchev at Fort Ross, the mysterious "ammam" is the name of both the mantle and the animal whose skin was used for making mantles.

The note done by V. under N 25 probably may be read in the following way: "Ammam" or mantle, blanket made of feathers. Such mantles indians used to weave from the skins of the hares. In Indian language the skins of the hares and hares themselves are called 'ammam'."

The analysis of the lists in which the objects received by V. from Sutter and Rotchev are mentioned depicted the fact that among the ethnographical objects of Voznesenskiy's California collection were not one, but two, mantles. Now these are in the American Department of MAE (col. N2520-S, 2520-G).

Along with the fur blankets, the feather mantles were made as a kind of cloth for cold seasons and were used as blankets to sleep



on, in the hot seasons. Maidu Indians preferred to make the blankets from the fur of wild animals such as cats, hares, rabbits. Konkow Indians used feathers for mantles. The most widely used were feathers of ducks and ravens. (31) R. Dixon states that the skill of weaving feather mantles was a special part of fabric arts of the Maidu. He did not make a differentiation between feather cloaks of Konkow and mantles of fur made by Maidu. He wrote: "The making of robes and blankets from strips of rabbit and wildcat skins or of the skin of geese and crows was also an important branch of the weaving art as practiced by the Maidu. The fur blankets were more common in the mountain region, it would seem; the bird-skin, in the Sacramento valley. The skin, with fur or feathers left on, was prepared by cutting it into strips from one to two centimeters in width. The strips, on drying curled or rolled, leaving the side out, and forming thus a fur or feather rope or cord of great softness. A sufficient length having been prepared, it was, in the case of the birdskins, usually twisted with a fibre cord to give added strength. Two poles about two meters in length were then set up about one meter apart. The fur or feathers was then wound back and forth about the two poles till a sufficient length of wrap was made. The process of sewing then began, and consisted merely in a slow and laborious twining of a double weft over the successive warp strands, knotting the cord to the outer warp strand at the top and bottom as they were alternately reached. The completed blankets were loose in texture, but very warm and were highly prized." (33)

Cultural traditions of Maidu and Konkow are very similar. The name "Maidu" is derived from anglicization of the native term "Koyo mkawi" meaning "low meadow". (34) Konkow used to live on the meadow terraces in the canyons of the rivers. Maidu lived on meadows in the valley of Sacramento. In the spring and autumn both tribes used to gather seeds and berries and go fishing for eels and salmon. In winter time they hunted for deer. They used to catch ducks and geese with the help of traps or kill birds with bow and arrow. (35) To obtain fur they used to kill rabbits and hares in traps. The dressing of the skins was the woman's occupation. (36)

Kuksu cult was widely spread among the Konkow Indians. During the Kuksu ceremonies Konkow impersonated various bird spirits: raven-Kuksu, the benefactor and teacher of humankind, ducks and others. They performed a special sacred duck dance. Only men could take part in the performance. That means that the dance was extremely sacred. The bird cult in the religious practice of the Konkow and Maidu tribes is the evidence of wide use of ritual feather regalias in ceremonial practices. Feathers of eagle, raven, falcon, pelican, swan were used for ritual costumes and personal adornment during the dances. The duck feathers were used for ceremonial belts, blankets and headdresses, (head-dress, head-gear, attire). One of them, made of feathers of the same species as the feather blankets, was collected by Voznesenskiy (570-8).

The dancer in feather regalias was the personification of ornithomorphic deity: condor, raven or duck. The identification

between the personality of the dancer and the deity was due to the logic of associative magic that means " a part instead of the whole". According to that logical conclusion, the duck's feathers symbolized the duck itself. The person in the blanket of duck feathers was thought as the duck ghost. The duck ghost was a symbol of ornithomorphic deity, connected with the water element. The magical force of the ghost can penetrate in different directions from deity to real duck and then to the person in the cloak and even to each feather of the bird. As Indians saw them, feathers were sacred and full of supernatural power. so, the cloaks made of the feathers were considered to be highly sacred objects. This suggestion made it possible to see them as cult objects more than the elements of everyday cloth. (36)

Similar ideas were widely spread among the peoples of Siberia. For example, the fringe on the hunting costumes symbolized the elk's wool. The hunter in the costume received a part of the elk's magic power. The power obtained by the hunter helped him in the hunting expedition.

Konkow Indians were famous among other tribes because of their skills at making blankets. Particularly, Hupa were fond of Konkow feather blankets. In Hupa myths, Konkow are mentioned as monopolists of weaving secrets. A young hero of one initiation myth of Hupa tribe is said to steal the feather blanket in the neighboring village (Konkow?) during the sacred initiation ritual. He made feathering for his arrows out of the blanket. Thanks to



the magical feathering the arrows brought him fantastic success in hunting. He became a famous hunter and married two sisters, the daughters of the chief. (37)

Feather mantelets were highly appreciated not only by Indians but by collectors. They are represented by only a few examples in the collections of American museums. The earliest acquisitions are in the Peabody museum. It was given to the Peabody of Harvard University in 1913 by Miss L. H. Eaton of Boston. It was obtained in California about the year 1821 by W. Gale. Mr. Gale sailed as clerk on the "Albatross" from Boston to California in 1800, remaining on the coast as agent for Bogant and Sturges, Boston, until 1835. He gave the blanket, several fine old Chumash baskets and other ethnographical specimens which he had collected in California to the family of his friend J. Eaton, whose daughter (above) presented them to the museum. (38)

Another blanket was donated by the family of Hutons in 1830 to the American Museum of Natural History in New York. The blanket had evidence of long wearing. (39) The third blanket is in the Museum of Natural History in Washington. Lieutenant Ringold who was a participant of the expedition of Captain Ch. Wilks of 1841 to the Sacramento and Feather River valleys brought the blanket to the museum. (40) During the expedition Ringold visited the villages of Maidu and Konkow where he obtained the blanket. (41) The dates of Ringold's and Voznesenskiy's expeditions, 1841, coincide. Both travellers obtained feather blankets. Konkow blankets of MAE more

closely resemble Maidu blankets published in Ch. Willough's article and K. Fiest's book, than feather blankets of Maka Indians of the northwest coast of North America. (42)

The history of feather mantelets of the California collection of MAE is closely connected with ethnography of Konkow Indians and the personality of Russian collector I. G. Voznesenskiy, but not J. Cook and K. Buhm as it was traditionally stated before. The history of blankets are also connected with Russian-America and Fort Ross which can be considered as Eldorado of Russian ethnographical science of the nineteenth century.

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