

TEXT

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THE TEXTILE SOCIETY

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FISH SKIN COAT FROM THE AMUR RIVER

ELISA PALOMINO

Along the lower reaches of the Amur River, in Eastern Siberia, where the water empties into the Pacific Ocean, the indigenous Nivkh, Ulch and Nanai peoples dressed themselves with fish skin coats made with the skin of the chum salmon. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, these indigenous peoples lived entirely from fishing and hunting. Salmon was an essential part of their world view, providing them with food and clothing for centuries. Living at a crossroads in East Asia, these groups have always interacted with each other and with the Chinese, Manchu, Koreans, Japanese and Russians. Imagination, resourcefulness, and materials have flowed in and out of their homeland for thousands of years. These Amur groups have distinctive identities. Yet centuries of sharing materials have led to similar material cultures, belief systems and rituals.

This paper looks at a Nivkh coat from the lower Amur River in Eastern Siberia acquired by the V&A Museum in 1905 and compares it to a John Galliano fish skin parka from the Autumn/Winter 2002 collection. The paper draws on the design practice that I instigated developing fish leather garments whilst working as head of the design studio at John Galliano. The paper reflects on the use of fish skin by Indigenous Arctic peoples, which has, since the late 1990s, been assimilated as an innovative sustainable material for fashion, due to its low environmental impact. Moreover, it reflects on the anthropological fashion journey on which I have embarked to understand processes of social, cultural and historical transformation through the study of fish skin practices in the Arctic.

International museums with anthropological collections provide knowledge in the relationships between humans and nature. Fish skin material culture features the connection between people, nature and the everyday objects that embody the choices people have made in relation to the environment. Fish skin artefacts reveal the technological innovation and cultural adaptation that different communities have chosen in different Arctic regions throughout time. They are physical proof of the sustainability of various Arctic cultures and of their resilience based on the material choices they have made.

Arctic indigenous peoples think of fish skin historical objects to be highly animated. They can channel the spirit and characteristics of the fish they are made from to the individual.

This makes them more like conduits than just objects in themselves. Everyday objects made of fish skin share the narrative of how Arctic indigenous peoples have chosen to fish and process their skins as raw materials and how they have harvested the fish resources for their own benefit. The material evidence of fish skin demonstrates the ability of Arctic indigenous people to inhabit the Arctic by developing complex cultural traditions connected with nature¹

The production and functional properties of fish skin are key to the creation of Arctic fish skin clothing, both in the strength of the skin itself and how it was sewn into garments.

Another key element is the use of natural tanning substances and dyes in the process. Usually, fish skin clothing was sewn in the winter. Cool temperatures rendered the skins more supple and the task of sewing easier². The people of the Amur used needles made of fish bones and thread made from reindeer sinew or fish skin thread. Sinew collected from along the spine and the legs of the reindeer was enough to sew an entire garment. Fish skin was also used as thread for sewing. After drying and softening the fish skin, it was cut into a long narrow strip that was used as thread. During the sewing of the skins, particular attention was paid to symmetry in the arrangement of the scales of the different skins to ensure continuity of the surface to make the seams imperceptible³.

The Nivkhs preferred to use whitened carp or salmon skins for the production of women's festive coats. They were bleached and processed to obtain a very smooth and honeycombed surface. They were whitened with white clay collected on the banks of the river Amur. The clay was collected in summer, at low tide, when it appeared on the shores of bays in the form of small lumps. The fish skin was smeared with a thin layer of clay, dried in the sun, smeared again, dried and then rubbed again. Another method of whitening fish skin was to hang the untreated skin out in the frost and leave it out until it turned white.⁴

The Nivkh coat (ca 1900) analysed in this paper is in the V&A Asian Department and was acquired by the museum in 1905. This coat is described as a Gilyak coat (an older term used for the Nivkh Indigenous people) from the lower Amur River near Vladivostok in Eastern Siberia, and there is a note adding that 'The tribe who make this work is said to



Fig. 1. Fish skin coat circa 1900 from the lower Amur River in Eastern Siberia, Nivkh population. The back features scale patterns mimicking the fish's own scales with black-blue-red abstract swirling patterns, Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

be dying out' (V&A, 2021). Sixty salmon were used to make this coat, each estimated to have weighed between 15 and 20 pounds. The skins were sewn together with sinew using the natural shape of the fish as a decorative element.⁵ The Nivkh used the skins of female chum salmon, which was softer, to make a gown. The exact number depended on the size of the gown being made. The underside of the fish skin had a terry surface (the fibres covering the fish skin were called *ungsu*) and hence did not cause discomfort to the person when in contact with the body.⁶ On the flesh side, the garment has long collagen fibres which ensure a high resistance and a lining with a "fur" effect which is particularly soft to the touch.⁷

The Nivkh fish skin coat has an almost austere look to it, with the exception of the decorative pattern on the left and right side of the garment. From the hem upwards on each side of the garment there is a black applied and painted border. This panel ends with an ornament of a scrolling design at the waist. A black painted border edges the neck, front overlap panel, hem, and sleeves. One could assume this was to protect the areas most prone to wear and tear, but we could also assume that the black paint may have a spiritually protective property to it. The neck edge is turned in and

stitched. The hem, sleeve ends, and edge of the outer front panel are finished with a cut edge.⁸ The outer front panel overlaps from left to right. The coat's style is reminiscent of Chinese and Manchurian clothing. It has a Manchu-inspired T-cut, characteristic of the region, with a wide left flap that is attached to the right flank. Its opening is to the right, like the neighbouring Chinese (Rajagopalan, 2001). Additionally, the pattern and sewing of the salmon skins is incredibly precise and methodical. You can tell that this coat was a labour of love and precision. The coat is unlined and has no fastenings. The absence of lining at the hem and edges reveals the silky, flowing fall of the skin as well as the structure of the skirt, which has a flat surface, well weighted by a large, heavy, black hem.

The back of the coat has a stunning, swirling, scale-shaped appliqué. The upper part of the back is decorated by painting (blue, red, and black) the inner side of the fish skin (fish-scale shaped pieces).⁹ The decoration is not only intricately detailed, with incredibly precise sewing, but also colourful and symbolic. Red, blue, and black dye had been used to paint the fish skin and the thread used to sew the fish skin appliqué onto the coat. A blue dyed, double creasing effect had been applied to the armhole and additional shoulder seamed panels. This blue area was made of thicker fish skin and was done to reinforce an area prone to wear. Furthermore, being another pattern piece, it probably was more easily replaceable than the fish skin making up the main body of the coat.

The Nivkh adorned their clothes with elaborate motifs. They used fish skin appliqué patterns which they glued on to the surface of the garment using fish-glue. Colours and designs were used alternately on the layers for a multi-coloured, multi-layered effect. Girls who were skilled in the art of appliqué were considered very good candidates for marriage.¹⁰ Clothing was adorned with complex spiral patterns intermingled with plant and animal motifs, or figures of mythical beasts (Rajagopalan, 2001).

Decorations on clothing were meant to keep evil away and pacify the spirits of the animal world.¹¹ People of the Amur attributed special powers to nature and animals, and they used them in stylised and conventional ways in clothing. The stylised depiction of birds, fish, snakes and water is used in fish skin robes.¹² According to the legends of the Nanai (whose material culture and symbolic system bear close resemblance to that of the Nivkh), the designs on the back of the jacket are supposed to protect a woman from what is not visible to her. A woman working at the fire with her back to the door needed extra protection. The placement of the appliqué motifs also provides a message around restricted communication taboos between women and men. Since a woman never faced her guests directly in traditional

society, she compensated by displaying an ornately decorated back. Women sat at the fire, with their backs to visitors, but those beautifully decorated backs said much more than their faces.¹³

This coat features a scale pattern mimicking the fish's own scales with black-blue-red abstract swirling patterns. Water, both as river and sea, is a recurring motif in the belief system of the Amur people. Local legends suggest fluidity between land and water, so that when characters cross the water, it is usually to begin a new phase of life. The water and the crossing thereof is a metaphor for transformation. The designs on this coat in all their symmetry, twist and curve gracefully – perhaps the flow of these spirals suggests the central place that water occupies in the lives of the Amur people.¹⁴

Colours most frequently used in Amur decorative arts were red, blue and black. Black was considered appropriate for festive clothing.¹⁵ For Amur river people, an important element for the production of fish skin clothing was the use of natural dyes to paint the ornaments on clothing. Nature provided them with a rich palette of colours used to decorate their clothes. For the preparation of colours, blue and red minerals had been collected on the shores of the Lower Amur river since ancient times. They were ground with dry red caviar and diluted with water to obtain a homogeneous mixture. In the Amur region, one can also find raw materials for dyeing of vegetable origin.¹⁶

The pigment analysis of the coat done at the V&A in 1998 revealed that the orange-red pigment is a natural earth pigment or ochre; the black is probably a carbon black; the green blue is probably Dyers Knotgrass. From the dye analysis, the orange red is likely to be safflower (*Carthamus tinctorius* L); the grey-green is likely to be knotgrass (*Polygonum tinctorum* L); the dark blue is likely to be knotgrass (*P. tinctorum*); the strong green is likely to be knotgrass (*P. tinctorum*) plus a natural yellow mordant dye.¹⁷

The use of fish skin by indigenous Arctic peoples, has, since the late 1990s been assimilated as an innovative sustainable material for fashion, due to its low environmental impact,¹⁸ since fish skins are sourced from the food industry's waste.¹⁹ The use of fish leather avoids the waste of a potentially renewable resource. As the demands on the Earth's resources by the fashion industry continue to grow, innovative materials, such as fish leather can address the impact on the natural world. Fish leather is increasingly seeing a resurgence as it requires less energy and resources to produce than conventional materials.²⁰ Due to the scarcity of raw materials, turning to other resources becomes more important for a sustainable fashion industry.

The Nivkh coat has been compared to a fish skin parka from John Galliano's Autumn/Winter 2002 collection. This research draws on my previous industry experience as a fashion designer working in the luxury industry for John Galliano. For this collection, we designed fish leather garments and accessories. We used salmon, perch, and cod skins sourced at Atlantic Leather, the world's biggest fish skin tannery, based in Iceland. We were amongst the first brands to use fish leather and by doing so, we situated the barely unknown sustainable material within the context of the luxury industry.

The collection was inspired by a family of Inuit travelling back in time to a 1950s Christian Dior catwalk. The notion of nomadic tribes, gathering garments like mementos, pervades this collection. Galliano combined 1950s silhouettes with eclectic materials such as fish skin, bleached denim, knits and brocades. On this occasion, Galliano dressed his modern shaman with fish skin parkas preparing them for the ceremonial role and shamanistic ceremony that his seasonal fashion shows had become over the years (See Figure 2).

Directing the John Galliano studio, I oversaw the creation of two collections a year for his namesake brand. They acted as a laboratory of ideas, allowing him to let his imagination



Fig. 2. John Galliano's prêt-à-porter 2002

run wild, free from both the commercial pressures associated with a house as iconic and as global as Dior and as a pure expression of his personal design style. Galliano's extraordinary genius for imaginative and exquisite design created collections full of handcrafted objects mixed with historical and ethnic references. We travelled the world physically and virtually through libraries and museums, bringing back elements transformed in the form of research books that would be the starting point for the collection. We were genuinely interested in other cultures when we were inspired by them. We were in search of beauty. It was done with respect, honour, and creativity.

I would have never thought 20 years ago that I would embark on a fashion anthropology journey to understand

processes of social, cultural, historical, and religious developments in the Arctic through the study of Arctic indigenous fish skin practices. Combining this recent knowledge with my previous experience in fashion has allowed me to recognise Indigenous ways of sustainable life alongside contemporary fashion patterns of over consumption and to identify Arctic and contemporary material cultures.

Being published in *Text* will give me the chance to present my findings on the subject of Arctic indigenous fish skin studies to the Society. It will provide a unique opportunity to spread knowledge of fish skin as a renewable raw material for the leather industry, making a significant contribution to fashion sustainability.

NOTES

- ¹ Lincoln, A., Cooper, J., Peter, L. L. (2020) *The Citi exhibition. Arctic, Culture and Climate*. The British Museum. Thames and Hudson.
- ² Rajagopalan, S., Buijs C. (2001) *Layers of meaning: Clothing on the Amur*. Leiden National Museum of Ethnology.
- ³ Cevoli, D, Glebova, E. (2015) *Esthétiques de l'amour: Sibérie extrême-orientale*. Paris: Musee du Quai Branly. Flammarion.
- ⁴ Melnikova, T. (2005) *The gift of "fish-skin barbarians"*
- ⁵ V&A (2021) *Gilyak coat from the lower Amur River in Eastern Siberia*. V&A Collections.
- ⁶ Melnikova, T, *ibid*
- ⁷ Cevoli, *ibid*
- ⁸ V&A (2021), *ibid*
- ⁹ V&A, *ibid*
- ¹⁰ Rajagopalan, S., Buijs C. (2001) *Layers of meaning: Clothing on the Amur*. Leiden National Museum of Ethnology.
- ¹¹ Oakes, J. Riewe R. (1998) *Spirit of Siberia: Traditional Native Life, Clothing, and Footwear*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
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- ¹³ Jude, I. (2016) *The Secret Language of Salmon Skin Coats*. Hakai Magazine.
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- ¹⁶ Cevoli, D, Glebova, E, *ibid*
- ¹⁷ V&A, *ibid*
- ¹⁸ Jacobs, B. (2018) *HowNow Magazine: The future of leather is plant-based*
- ¹⁹ Sigfusson, and Arnason, 2017
- ²⁰ Global Fashion Agenda, 2017

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