# **Exchanging stories**

### Art and identity of an Arctic people

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**Abstract:** Sámi Stories. Art and Identity of an Arctic People *is an exhibition created and curated by the Northern Norway Art Museum and Tromsø University Museum to commemorate the bicentennial celebrations of the Norwegian Constitution. The exhibition debuted at the Northern Norway Art Museum in Tromsø, Norway, before traveling to New York City and Anchorage, Alaska. This paper shares stories to demonstrate the roles that museums can play in the interpretation and representation of Sámi cultures. Additionally, the shared discussion will advance educational outreach in Alaska and elsewhere concerning similarities and differences surrounding the adoption of indigenous concepts, practices, values and worldviews.* 

**Keywords:** Sámi heritage, exhibition, education outreach, comparative perspective across the Arctic region.

Sámi Stories. Art and Identity of an Arctic People is an exhibition created and curated by the Northern Norway Art Museum and Tromsø University Museum to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the Norwegian Constitution. Norway and the United States own the two oldest national constitutions in the world. The Norwegian Constitution, a symbol of freedom, independence and democracy is celebrated annually on Norway's National Day, the 17th of May.

The Norwegian Constitution is unique in that it was amended in 1988 to protect the rights of the nation's indigenous people, the Sámi. Article 110a, also known as the Sámi Paragraph, addresses minority rights and is fundamental to the Sámi. The article states: "It is the responsibility of the authorities of the State to create conditions enabling the Sámi people to preserve and develop their language, culture, and way of life." In 1988 the Norwegian Parliament ratified Article 110a as an amendment to the Constitution. This action paved the way in the year following for the establishment of the Sámi Parliament, a representative body for people of Sámi heritage.

The year 2014 marked the bicentenary of the Norwegian Constitution and the 25th anniversary of the establishment of the Sámi Parliament. In recognition of this commemorative year and, moreover, to draw attention to Article 110a of the Constitution, the Northern Norway Art Museum and Tromsø University Museum collaborated to launch an exhibition, *Sámi Stories*, and raise awareness of Sámi art and culture abroad, specifically in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

The artworks selected for the Sámi Stories exhibition represent a variety of media but share a common purpose. Collectively the works reveal themes about Sámi history, politics, religion and society. The Arctic landscape creates a backdrop for the narratives. Each piece is a form of expression influenced by historical documentary and embellished with the artist's fantasy. In the creative process the artist invites viewers to journey to other worlds, connecting the present to the past and communicating the unseen. Where do the stories lead viewers? Through the exchange of stories the exhibition conveyed knowledge and experience. By sharing Sámi Stories with those abroad it encouraged audiences to experience multiple perspectives and expand their horizons. Enriching the exhibition with face-to-face encounters and publications aimed to inspire future cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic nations.

This paper shares stories in order to demonstrate the role that museums can play in the interpretation and representation of Sámi cultures. Additionally, the shared discussion will advance educational outreach in Alaska and elsewhere concerning similarities and differences surrounding the adoption of indigenous concepts, practices, values and worldviews. Outreach and partnerships with universities and educational institutions also provide opportunities to extend a museum's offerings beyond its walls.

### The Reindeer Project – forerunner of Sámi Stories

Alaska's history unfolds with prior stories of the Sámi from the turn of the twentieth century. The

story of the Reindeer Project began with Sheldon Jackson, a Presbyterian minister, missionary and political leader. Jackson conceived a plan to introduce reindeer, not native to Alaska, and eventually teach reindeer husbandry to Alaska Natives living in western Alaska. To initiate the project Jackson looked to Sápmi for experienced herders and sent a scout to recruit Sámi herding families. As a result, on February 4, 1898, a vessel called The Manitoban departed Bossekop, a seaport on the north coast of Norway, bound for New York. On board the ship were 113 passengers, 539 reindeer, 418 sledges, 511 reindeer harnesses and 500 tons of moss. The individuals on board included Sámi herding families with their children, adventurous bachelors, six young couples on their honeymoons, and a small number of Norwegians and Finns who either were herders or served as cooks. After 23 very long days at sea, The Manitoba Expedition arrived in New York. The group then ventured across America by train, westbound for Seattle, Washington. They continued their journey to Alaska by ship, arriving at Unalakleet on the Norton Sound five weeks later on July 27, 1898. By this stage of the expedition more than 390 of the reindeer had died. Nevertheless, a total of 600 Iñupiat and Yup'ik apprentices signed up to become reindeer herders. By 1910, the number of reindeer in Alaska grew from a few hundred to a population of 27,000 reindeer. About 80 herders stayed on in Alaska after their contract with the Reindeer Project ended.<sup>2</sup> The history behind the beginning of reindeer husbandry in Alaska may be past, but it is far from forgotten. Today there are still many descendants from the Manitoba Expedition with Sámi heritage residing in Alaska.

Nearly 120 years later, in the summer of 2014, the Norwegian exhibition, *Sámi Stories. Art and Identity of an Arctic People*, traveled

the same path as the Manitoba Expedition of 86 1898 however without the reindeer, moss and recruited herders. The Sámi Stories exhibition crossed the ocean with its first stopover in New York City, at Scandinavia House in Manhattan. Scandinavia House, an institution that collaborated with the Northern Norway Art Museum in the past, served as the first venue for Sámi Stories.<sup>3</sup> Scandinavia House is the leading cultural and educational link between the United States and the Nordic countries. It is also the headquarters of The American-Scandinavian Foundation, a nonprofit organization that works to build international understanding through an extensive program of fellowships, grants, intern/trainee sponsorship, publishing and membership offerings. The center offers a wide range of programs that illuminate the contemporary Nordic culture and vitality of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. Featuring a Sámi-themed exhibition, however, was a first for Scandinavia House. The exhibition was well received and subsequently led to other Sámi projects. For example, in May 2015 Scandinavia House hosted the Sámi Performing & Visual Arts Festival in collaboration with Sámi Teáhter Searvi.

> From New York City the Sámi Stories exhibition continued along the same westward journey as the earlier Manitoba Expedition, reaching its final destination in Anchorage, Alaska, at the Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center where it was on view from February to May 2015. Through a combination of art, history and science the Anchorage Museum is recognized as a leading center for scholarship, engagement and investigation of Alaska and the North. The city of Anchorage is also partnered with Norway as one of Tromsø's sister cities and circumpolar neighbors.

### JUXTAPOSING ART AND CULTURAL HISTORY

*Sámi Stories* examines the history, identity and visual culture of the Sámi. It is an overview of art and Sámi identity with Norway as the focal point. The exhibition features a selection of artworks and cultural historical artifacts from Tromsø University Museum, such as *duodji* (traditional Sámi handicrafts) – including a reindeer milk scoop, shaman's drum, cradle, a *komsekule* and a selection of caps and dolls. An illustrated, two-volume boxed set catalogue accompanies the exhibition complete with eleven essays discussing a variety of topics including Sámi cultural expressions, art, language, politics and history.<sup>4</sup>

The Northern Norway Art Museum is curator for the artworks in the Sámi Stories exhibition. It is the mission of the Museum to collect art related to the North and specifically Sámi culture. Showcasing the arts from this circumpolar region of the world to a wider, international audience is a significant role of the Museum. Several of the works in the exhibition are on loan from the Museum's own collection. More works were borrowed from other prominent collections, including UiT The Arctic University of Norway, The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo, RiddoDuottarMuseat - The Sámi Collections, Karasjok, and SpareBank 1 Nord-Norge's Art Foundation. The pieces represent various media including sculpture, video installation, woodcut prints, embroidery and photography.

Tromsø University Museum also is curator for the exhibition. This Museum's contribution to the exhibition emphasizes citizenship identity and the politics of belonging. The two dominant or overarching themes are: first and foremost the role of Sámi in terms of Norwegian nationalism and nation building, including the building of democracy and the modern welfare state; and secondly, the complex discourse about Sáminess, equity and citizenship identity. The exhibition presents a case of cultural and political revolution by a non-violent indigenous minority and its effects in terms of strengthening Sámi identity as well as belonging and participation in the larger national community. Tromsø University Museum, northern Norway's oldest scientific institution, was established in 1872 and became affiliated with UiT The Arctic University of Norway in 1976. It is a regional museum and center of research within the natural sciences, social and cultural history, including Sámi culture.

The addition of cultural historical artifacts from Tromsø University Museum's collection to the selected artworks was a curatorial decision intended to target American audiences. In general Americans have little or no knowledge of the Sámi peoples and their culture. The combination of artifacts and artworks gives viewers the opportunity to witness the objects that inspired the artists. For example, on display are a shaman's drum and mallet from the seventeenth century, addressing Sámi religious

Fig. 1. Shaman's drum and mallet from Lycksele, Västerbotten county, Sweden. Tromsø University Museum, inv. no TSL 1343 a–b. Photo: Mari Karlstad.



practice, an ancient form of shamanism using painted skin drums (fig. 1). This is an exceptionally prized object in the show as shaman drums are quite rare. Most drums were confiscated and destroyed by Norwegian authorities on accusations of sorcery. There

Fig. 2. Iver Jåks: Offertory Pillars I, 1980. Northern Norway Art Museum. Photo: Bjørn Jørgensen/Arctic Photo.



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are only about 80 drums in existence today in Europe and only a few in Norway, including this drum from Tromsø University Museum. The drum and a traditional form of song, *joik*, are the media that transcend the shaman's spirit to another dimension – an encounter with the spiritual world.

Not unlike the shaman, artists deal with mythical aspects both in meaning and in practice. The link between art and shamanism first appeared in the context of modern art during the twentieth century with artists Marc Chagall and Vasily Kandinsky, along with Joseph Beuys (Walter & Fridman 2004). The shaman's drum is richly decorated with a diverse set of symbols to represent elements in nature, mythological figures and people. In Iver Jåks' Offertory Pillars I (1980, fig. 2) we encounter a similar set of symbols: sun, set of reindeer antlers, drum mallet and bird (Gullickson 2010). Jåks was inspired by shamanism and believed that art had the ability to take viewers on a journey:

The shaman's mindset was broader than the average person. In a similar vein I go to great lengths, hoping viewers discover that my art is no just art, but symbolizes ideas that extend into the universe (Koefoed 2002:117).

In the exhibition viewers have the unique opportunity of experiencing Iver Jåks' sculpture in the presence of an original shaman's drum.

#### Sámi art history

History painting, a genre dedicated to subjects from history and mythology, is the inspiration for the selection of artworks in this exhibition. History painting, long regarded as the highest art form in the hierarchy of genres, came rather late to Norway, not until the twentieth century, around the time the Constitution was established in 1814. In other countries there was a long held tradition of history painting and established conventions for artists to follow. In Norway, artists in the nineteenth century gave form to stories from history and mythology never before visualized (Ljøgodt 2011).

The Sámi Stories exhibition shows how artists represent significant themes from Sámi history and politics. Featured are the works of numerous Sámi artists from Norway, Sweden and Finland. John Savio, Iver Jåks, Aslaug Juliussen and Arnold Johansen are Norwegian Sámi artists. Britta Marakatt-Labba and Rose-Marie Huuva are from Sweden and Marja Helander from Finland. Arvid Sveen is a Norwegian artist with a particular interest in Sámi themes. The artists represent three different generations.

When organizing *Sámi Stories* the curators asked the following questions: Is there a history painting genre within Sámi art history? And if so, when did the story begin? John Savio (1902–1938) represents the first generation of artists and was the first artist with Sámi background to receive a formal education in the visual arts from the Art Academy in Kristiania (today's Oslo) in the early 1920s.<sup>5</sup> While he

Fig. 3. John Savio: Reindeer Calves. Tromsø University Museum. Photo: Maria Dorothea Schrattenholz.





Fig. 4. Britta Marakatt-Labba: The Crows, 1981. UiT The Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø / KORO. Photo: Ola Røe.

worked in drawing and painting, Savio is best known for his black-and-white woodcut prints illustrating scenes from everyday Sámi society (fig. 3). Savio captures a sense of place and cultural identity. The interplay between man and nature is a recurrent theme in his work.

Several of the artists interpret significant events from history. Britta Marakatt-Labba embroiders Sámi stories on white linen. Embroidery as a decorative element has a solid tradition in duodji. Marakatt-Labba's stories evolve from Sámi history and her own family's experiences with reindeer herding in Idivuoma, a Sámi village in the Kiruna municipality in northern Sweden. One of her more well known works, The Crows (1980) (fig. 4) illustrates the Alta Controversy - a movement against the development of the Alta-Kautokeino waterway that threatened to submerge the Sámi town of Máze. The Alta Controversy sparked other debates, i.e. the rights to natural resources and the relationship between large-scale government versus ethnic minorities. In The Crows a flock of crows descend from the sky on the horizon. As the birds approach the ground one by one they gradually transform into uniformed police officers. This metaphorical artwork symbolizes the crow from Sámi mythology which represents authority and devours everything in its way.

Another *Sámi Stories* artwork that references history is Arnold Johansen's expressive woodcut Departure (2000, fig. 5). Johansen transports the viewer back in time, illustrating the devastation of numerous communities scattered across Finnmark and Northern Troms at the close of World War II. During their retreat from the Soviets, the Germans enforced a "scorched earth policy." Johansen revives the story of the operation that destroyed nearly all houses in Finnmark leaving more than 70,000 people homeless.

Sámi identity has long been bound up with the reindeer, historically a vital resource of the Sámi and the foundation of their livelihood and cultural identity. The reindeer is an icon of "Sáminess" outside of Sápmi. This fact is clearly visible in many of the older and contemporary objects on view, including a nineteenth century reindeer harness, a horn knife and a birch reindeer milk scoop. The *Sámi Stories* textile artist, Aslaug Juliussen (fig. 6), was actively involved with reindeer herding for over 20





Fig. 5. Arnold Johansen: Departure – Black, 2000. Northern Norway Art Museum. Photo: Bjørn Jørgensen/Arctic Photo.



Fig. 6. Aslaug Juliussen: Antler Spin, 2006. Sámiid Vuorká-Dávvirat / The Sámi Collections, Karasjok, Norway. Photo: Liv Engholm.

years and incorporates reindeer remains into her fiber and textile works. The stories Juliussen relates are spun in the materials she uses.

Also in the *Sámi Stories* exhibition is Finnish photographer, Marja Helander, who explores the contrast between characteristic modern Sámi life in a playful series of photographs entitled *Modern Nomads*. In the series Helander explores her dual background, that of urban life in Helsinki in sharp contrast to Sámi roots in Utsjok, Finland. The artist experiments with her identity by placing herself in various landscapes in the North and often in humorous settings. *Mount Palopää* (fig. 7) shows Helander venturing in heels through the snow, dressed in a light blue suit and a traditional Sámi cap while toting a handbag.

### CROSS-CULTURAL EXCHANGE, CONNECTIONS AND COLLABORATIONS

The face-to-face encounters that accompanied the *Sámi Stories* exhibition brought synergy not only to the institutions and artists, but also to the community at large in New York and Anchorage. Both venues hosted daylong symposiums with various lectures by researchers in the field and artist panel discussions. Visitors approached exhibition organizers with questions, or related stories about their own Sámi ancestry during the guided tours. The events were well attended, with over 500 members from the local community and many university students at the Anchorage function.

There is a saying in the Sámi language "to have eyes." This goes beyond the physical ability to see, and implies that individuals perceive on a more meaningful level (Guttorm 2011). For this intuitive sense a great amount of knowledge is required vis-à-vis the visible and invisible. Such knowledge is often communicated through dialogue and by interaction among individuals. This is something the curators experienced in their work with *Sámi Stories*. Cultural enrichment took shape in many forms at both venues. At the New York opening, renowned Sámi singer and world musician Mari Boine performed a concert at Scandinavia House.



Fig. 7. Marja Helander: Mount Palopää, 2001. Sámiid Vuorká-Dávvirat / The Sámi Collections, Karasjok, Norway.

Boine also featured in a panel discussion as part of the opening, along with artists Britta Marakatt-Labba, Aslaug Juliussen and American artist Jason Lujan. Following the show's run, Marja Helander gave an artist talk. One American viewer was so taken by Sámi Stories that she visited three times and shared with the Swedish artist that the exhibition "enriched her life." Of Swedish heritage, she fondly remembered her grandfather telling stories of his life as a Laplander and never before had made the connection to Sápmi.

### OUTREACH: CIRCUMPOLAR EXPRESSIONS AND IDENTITIES

As cities in circumpolar nations with large indigenous communities, Tromsø and Anchorage share numerous commonalities. *Sámi Stories* was the catalyst to reestablish partnerships with the Sister Cities Commission and other dignitaries of circumpolar affiliation. Several commissioners attended the opening of the exhibition at the Anchorage Museum. Fran Ulmer, chair of the United States Arctic Research Commission and Norwegian consul Erling Trygve Johansen were also present. *Sámi Stories* attained sponsorships to support travel for the artists to participate in the openings in New York and Anchorage. Aslaug Juliussen, Norway, and Britta Marakatt-Labba, Sweden, received travel grants, Juliussen from OCA – Office for Contemporary Art Norway, Oslo, and Marakatt-Labba from Norrbotten County and the Estrid Ericson Foundation.

The visiting Sámi artists themselves made unexpected discoveries while in Anchorage. Britta Marakatt-Labba learned that one of her very own works is represented in the Anchorage Museum's collection. Marakatt-Labba's tapestry was part of a touring exhibition to several circumpolar nations in the early 1990s called *Arts from the Arctic.* This was the first major assemblage of contemporary circumpolar art and showcased 100 individual artworks. All of the artists with indigenous backgrounds came from five different circumpolar regions: Russia, Scandinavia, Canada, Alaska and Greenland. At the close of the tour, artworks were bequeathed to different museums.

A daylong symposium hosted by the Art Department on the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) campus kicked off the opening of *Sámi Stories*.<sup>6</sup> Collaboration with the UAA was an essential part of extending the outreach of the exhibition. It reached a broader audience including university students and faculty who otherwise may not have visited the exhibition. Several students responded that seeing the show after attending the symposium had a large impact, it was meaningful and insightful. The symposium offered in-depth perspectives on Sámi history, identity and visual culture. In addition, comparatives aspects of the Sámi and Alaska Native cultures 92 were explored, creating an ideal backdrop for cultural exchange. Several students found the symposium to be a rewarding experience. One student reflected: "The bond between the northern peoples remains strong and this symposium helped strengthen those bonds." Other students described the symposium as "thought-provoking," "incredibly informative," and "eye opening."

The symposium included an engaging artist panel with insightful discussion among contemporary Alaskan and Scandinavian artists exchanging stories about their artistic processes, histories and influences. The four Alaskan participating artists, all of Alaska Native heritage, were Ron Senungetuk, Alvin Amason, Sonya Kelliher-Combs and Susie Bevins-Ericsen. Britta Marakatt-Labba and Aslaug Juliussen were the participating Scandinavian Sámi artists.

The discussion focused on several themes, materials linked with culture, community and place, art education, political issues, the differentiation between male and female roles in the culture and culture specific expressions. Environmental concerns were also addressed, for example, mining in Alaska versus mining in Sápmi. Alaska Native artist Susie Bevins-Ericsen movingly talked about her Norwegian background. Her father was a Norwegian whaler based outside Prudhoe Bay off the north slope of Alaska, while her mother was Alaska Native. Bevins-Ericsen was often discriminated because of her dual identity. These issues along with drug and alcohol abuse are addressed in her art. The artists also discussed their use of traditional materials in new ways and how they associate materials with home and memory. Juliussen's use of reindeer remains points to gender roles involving reindeer slaughter and how various aspects are traditionally female or male dominated.

There are depictions of animals in both Sámi and Native Alaskan art, each having their own cultural and sometimes spiritual significance. One particular interesting point in the artist discussion was of ravens and their symbolism in Alaska Native versus Sámi culture respectively. This was based on a question in reference to Britta Marakatt-Labba's piece *The Crows.* Alaskans familiarized the idea of the crow with the raven, which is regarded as a very important figure known as a trickster. As mentioned earlier, the Sámi see the crow in a more negative light, as a symbol of authority. It was interesting to see the contrast in how two cultures viewed these birds.

A hands-on workshop rounded off the symposium. The idea was to follow-up the theme of culture-based materials from the artist panel discussion. Participants made Sámi style key chains using materials from Sápmi, reindeer leather and mica (kråkesølv in Norwegian), along with thread and felt in the national Sámi colors, blue, red, yellow and green. Touching and feeling the reindeer hide added another dimension to the learning experience. Mica is often used as a decorative element on Sámi clothing, purses and accessories. The use of mica can be traced far back in time and is commonly found in northern Norway. It is used as a cheap substitute for silver and appears like small shiny ornamental disks on traditional costume, belts, purses and wallets. We also learned about the significance of the materials in Sámi culture, such as the healing properties of precious metals like silver and brass. This draws a parallel to one of the objects in Sámi Stories, an enlarged version of a komsekule (fig. 8) - a silver pendant used to protect against evil spirits, often suspended over a komse, cradle in Sámi,

The symposium activities provided a means especially for UAA students to better



Fig. 8. Randi Marainen: Komsekule, 2014. Tromsø University Museum. Photo: Adnan Icagic.

understand such complex issues existing not only in Alaska but also in other indigenous communities in the circumpolar region. Most importantly, it was an integrated learning experience provided by combining an exhibition, a daylong symposium, a hands-on workshop and face-to-face meeting opportunities. This connected artists, researchers and educators in discussions of emerging issues.

#### **FUTURE PATHWAYS**

Sámi Stories successfully captivated a wider audience for Sámi narratives through art and culture. Through a selection of artworks and cultural artifacts, the exhibition offered compelling stories about Sámi history, politics, religion and society. Several stories appear obscure or concealed, for example concerning the artist' identity. Educational programming associated with Sámi Stories worked to communicate these themes, which also speak on a universal level. With this project we hope to inspire future collaboration between circumpolar nations. We will continue our cross-cultural collaborative work to make art and culture from Sápmi known to a wider, international audience. Sámi Stories was limited to artworks created by established artists. In the future, we would like to include the stories told by the younger generation of artists. It would be interesting to compare these stories with the older generation.

Sharing *Sámi Stories* with the United States illustrated that the paths of the Sámi and Americans intersected in the past and continue to be connected today. Through partnership, collaboration and educational outreach, museum exhibitions can play a significant role in helping audiences to better understand shared perspectives among indigenous cultures and heritages across the Arctic countries. There remains much to be learned and experienced from our neighbors.

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- Sámi Stories was co-curated by Marit Anne Hauan, director at Tromsø Museum and Charis Gullickson, curator at the Northern Norway Art Museum.
- 2. During the 1990s stories from the *Reindeer Project* started to appear in *Báiki. The International Sámi Journal.* Founding editor of *Báiki,* Faith Fjeld, and coeditor Nathan Muus cocurated *The Sámi. Reindeer People of Alaska,* an exhibition of photographs that traveled between 2004 and 208 to various venues in Alaska, such as the Anchorage Museum, and within the Lower 48. Faith Fjeld, who passed away in 2014, dedicated her life to learning about her South Sámi ancestors. She wrote an in-depth article about the *Reindeer Project* titled "The Alaska Sámi: A reindeer story," published in *Vesterheim Magazine,* Vol. 7, No. 2, 2009.
- 3. The *World Conference of Indigenous Peoples* was held at the United Nations Headquarters in New York City during the run of the exhibition.
- 4. The Fritt Ord Foundation, which promotes freedom of expression, provided funding for the books that were published by Orkana Academic.
- Savio most likely studied at the National Academy of Craft and Art Industry in the early 1920s, but it is not documented exactly when or for how long, see: *Norsk kunstnerleksikon*, Vol. 3, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1986, 449.
- Herminia Wei-Hsin Din organized the symposium. http://www.uaa.alaska.edu/art/ circumpolar-international-symposium-2015.cfm

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