A Soul in Everything
Encounters with Ainu from the North of Japan

Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum
Cultures of the World
Cologne, Germany
Eine Seele in Allem
Begegnungen mit Ainu aus dem Norden Japans
5 Nov 2021
20 Feb 2022
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RAUTENSTRAUCH-JOEST-MUSEUM
KULTUREN DER WELT
Exhibition

**A life in harmony** with nature and the spirituality associated with it have always been of elementary importance to Ainu groups in northern Japan and are still a central element of their cultural identity today. For them, there is a living soul (*kamuy*) in almost everything that communicates with people. Ainu groups are considered the indigenous inhabitants of northern Japan.
Originally, they lived as hunter-gatherer communities mainly on the islands of Hokkaido and Sakhalin and traded with Russia and Japan. From the mid-19th century, their territories were colonized by Japan and many Ainu were resettled. They had to abandon their traditions, were no longer allowed to speak their language and were often obliged to do forced labor. Extensive assimilation of these groups was the result. In the late 1960s, a revitalization movement developed that led to recognition as an indigenous community in 2008 and to its legal implementation by the Japanese government in 2019. According to statistics, there are around 25,000 Ainu, but the number is probably much higher as many people with Ainu roots do not identify themselves for fear of discrimination and want to remain unidentified.
Der lange Weg zur Anerkennung

Das neue Jahrtausend


In the **Cologne exhibition**, the beauty of things is made visible. It gives an insight into the history and resistance movement of Ainu groups and at the same time an impression of the beauty of their material and immaterial culture, complemented by contemporary artistic positions.
The cooperation with the National Ainu Museum, Hokkaido, Japan and the scientists affiliated there enabled deeper insights into Ainu cultures. In close exchange with representatives of Ainu groups, aspects of handling the things were discussed from a curatorial, restorative, and conservation-ethical perspective. Contemporary artistic positions were intensively integrated into the processual creation of the exhibition and elaborated for the exhibition.
These include video works by artist and Ainu activist Mayunkiki, in which she reflects on what it means to be “Ainu” and thus being part of a social minority in Japan; poignant portraits of both old and young generations of Ainu by Italian documentary photographer and director Laura Liverani, who thus sets a counterpoint to the historical portraits of Ainu in the RIM’s photographic collection; video projections by French artist Boris Labbé that intertwine duplication, reflections, and interweaving of the patterns of Ainu textiles and onomatopoeia of Ainu chants; and the dance works of Norway-based Ainu activist and artist Dr. Kanako Uzawa, who not only stimulates a sensitisation in the perception of minorities, but also responds to Ainu traditions in her artistic works.
Contemporary Artists

Ainu activist and artist Mayunkiki (Mai Hachiya) is intensely concerned with her own identity and the tradition of female tattooing in Ainu cultures. She is also a member of the vocal trio “Marewrew”, which interprets traditional songs. In two video sequences, she interviews her own parents on sensitive topics such as identity and traditional tattooing.

Did you know that you were Ainu from when you were a child? I knew. Both of my parents are Ainu. Even before I could remember, my father always told me, “You are Ainu. And that is nothing to be ashamed about.”

Vice Japan Interview with Hiroshi Arahara, translated by notautmiperson 23.2.2017
“Which way should I go? Singing in the white snow asking who I am.”

Beyond Ainu Studies, 2014, 86

Dr. Kanako Uzawa

The Ainu scholar and activist focuses on the issues of identity and social change. She lives with her family in Norway and is currently a research associate at the Research Faculty of Media and Communication at Hokkaido University. She contributes to collaborative research and Ainu performing arts on the multiple articulations of indigenous knowledge. She is also a research collaborator on ArCSII (Arctic Challenge for Sustainability). She is a member of the editorial board of AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples in New Zealand, Aotearoa.
“The posed portrait as a mode of representation highlights both personal and social identities of each individual. In a collaboration between photographer and sitter, each person portrayed has some degree of control in how they appear in the images. Whether at home, at the workplace, at school, or elsewhere, the everyday environment is transformed into a temporary set where to perform [an] identity.”

Citation: Japan Foundation Sydney, 9.5.2019

Laura Liverani is an Italian documentary photographer and university lecturer. She lives in Japan and Italy. Her film and photography project Ainu Neno an Ainu is a journey of identity exploration and reflection on what it means to be Ainu today, in the practices of daily life. It shows how Ainu are engaged in preserving their own culture and re-developing themselves in a globalised modernity. “Ainu Neno an Ainu” means “human like a human” in the Ainu language.
“My work relies on repetitive images, repetitive movements and time loops.”

Work Portrait "MONADE", 2020

Boris Labbé

The work of French video artist Boris Labbé draws heavily on his drawing practice and thrives on merging images and sounds in a rhythm. Labbé usually works with reflections and repetition. In his works of the series “SIRKI”, it is traditional textile patterns of the Ainu cultures and chants in which these structures are found again. The vocals to the videos are by Marewrew, a trio that includes Mayunkiki, who collaborated with Boris Labbé during his stay as artist in residence at Tenjinyama Art Studio in Sapporo in Hokkaido in July 2018.
The Collections in the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum

The museum’s collections include 203 items that can be attributed to Ainu groups, as well as 80 historical photographs by Polish photographer Bronisław Piłsudski, who traveled to Ainu areas in the late 19th century. At that time, Western interest in Ainu cultures was high. They were idealized as good-natured and noble, in line with a romantic version of Rousseau’s notion of the “noble savage.” In Germany, moreover, the thesis of Ainu as a “missing link” between “Asian” and “European” people was intensively pursued.
Europäische Sammelleidenschaft: 
Die „Edlen Wilden“ Asiens

Auf der Suche nach den „Edlen Wilden“


As a result, interest in their culture grew steadily. This was also the case with Wilhelm Joest, who traveled to Hokkaido in 1881 and from whose collection 18 items have been preserved by the museum. At the same time, antique and ethnographic dealers such as the Johann Friedrich Umlauff company sensed opportunities for lucrative business. In 1906 and 1907, more than 700 things from Hokkaido and Sakhalin were first offered to the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum by the Hamburg company Umlauff. The Foundation for the Promotion of the Museum acquired 220 numbers for the collection. In the further course of the 20th century, interest in the cultures of Ainu ebbed away, as evidenced by the small number of only three additions from private collections within the following 106 years.
The Cologne collection includes ethnographic things such as tools, knives and other weapons for hunting, as well as arrows and bows, lances and fishing accessories. Also plates, bowls, spoons and mashers for preparing and serving food. Ceremonial items include libation spatulas (ikupasuy), prayer sticks (inao), and amulets. An important inventory is the numerous textiles that were elaborately handcrafted by Ainu women. These include bags made of elm bast, carrying straps, robes, belts, headdresses, gloves and footwear, a small but important selection of which is presented in the exhibition.
Patterns of Protection – Elm bast and embroidered silk

In the case of Ainu textiles, two main sources come together: on the one hand, Ainu women made garments from a variety of materials. These included fish skins, bird skins, and furs from hunted animals, but fabrics were also made from the bast fibers of trees such as linden and elm and from the fibers of nettle, and mats were woven from rushes. In contrast, textiles imported from Japan, China and Russia were made of cotton, wool or silk. In most cases, these were so precious that they were only used to decorate the homemade materials.

The textile highlight in the exhibition is a complete nineteenth century garment made of elm bast (attush amip), decorated with appliquéd patterns. The plain weave fabric was woven on a simple loom in which the weaver controls the tension of the warp threads by means of her body posture. Fine stripes of dark blue cotton threads are woven in at irregular intervals between the warp threads of bast fibers. Two of the fabric strips in a width of about 40 cm were laid over the shoulder and sewn together to form the body, while two other shorter ones were ingeniously folded in a triangular shape and attached as sleeves. Along the hems and the collar, wide ribbons run around the robe. A complex symmetrical pattern is appliquéd on the back and in the lower part. This consists of wide stripes of indigo dyed cotton fabric from Japan and narrow curved interwoven lines above. These are also made of imported tabby weave cotton fabrics. The fact that these line patterns were not embroidered with threads, but rather appliquéd from narrow strips of fabric, indicates that this garment originated from an Ainu group from Sakhalin that no longer exists today and was forcibly resettled to Hokkaido in 1875.

The bands around the openings and the applied patterns are meant apotropaically, that is, to protect the person wearing the robe. The Ainu expression for this is semaka omare. Characteristic of Ainu patterns are spiral or bracket-like shapes (kirow) and thorns (ayus) attached to the corners.
Another treasure of the collection is a small triangular amulet (inv. No. 253071) made of threaded glass beads and lined with a small piece of Japanese fabric. This amulet was woven into the forehead hair of a boy to protect him from evil forces and bad influences. After his first successful hunt his forehead hair was shaved and the amulet fell away.

The high importance of the amulet becomes clear in the exchange with today’s Ainu cultures, as only very few of them have survived worldwide.
Historische Fotografie – Festgehalten für die Ewigkeit

A New Way of Dealing with Things

Things were reclassified not only from a curatorial perspective but also from a restoration and conservation perspective. The visit of a Japanese delegation in 2019 to study Ainu-related collections in European museums allowed things to be reclassified.
Most of the things in the collection are made of perishable natural materials such as wood, bark, and fibers and undergo a process of change over time: they age, become brittle, or change in colors and textures. Slowing down these processes and thus documenting and preserving the things and all the information they contain for the future is the task of conservators. In the exhibition “A Soul in Everything” Petra Czerwinske, Kristina Hopp and Stephanie Lüerßen were responsible for this. They were also in close contact with colleagues from the National Ainu Museum and representa-
tives of Ainu from the very beginning. In addition to material-technological aspects, they discussed the handling of the things from a restorative and conservation-ethical perspective. In addition, in cooperation with the Institute for Restoration and Conservation Sciences at the Technical University in Cologne, three textile items from the collection were examined and their materials and manufacturing techniques determined. In this way, valuable findings were obtained, which are presented in the exhibition.
The exhibition “A Soul in Everything — Encounters with Ainu from the North of Japan” opens a space for contemporary Ainu voices from artists and activists, while likewise pointing out the beauty of the material culture that goes far back in time. Moreover, the exhibition gives awareness to the complex and thorny path of Ainu cultures to recognition, which is still ongoing.
The exhibition is a creation of a multitude of actors – artists, activists, scientists. Already in the development process, the focus was on a sensitive handling of things from a curatorial as well as a conservation perspective, which is also applied in the presentation of historical photography, the design, the use of indigenous patterns and the colour scheme.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT
Annabelle Springer

EXHIBITION DESIGN AND GRAPHICS
Büro für Gestaltung, Marie-Helen Scheid

CONSERVATION SUPPORT
Petra Czerwinske, Birgit Depenbrock, Kristina Hopp, Stephanie Lüerßen

INSTALLATION
Christian Andert, Steffen Beyer, Manfred Littfin, Ralf Eidneier

TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY, INSTITUTE FOR RESTORATION AND CONSERVATION SCIENCES
Laura Peters, Nicole Reifarth, Anne Sicken, Viola Michaela Costanza, Tjarda Rauh, Anastasia Zitzer

MEDIA
Süleyman Atalayın

FILM EDITING
Annette Metz, Paul Schmid

LIGHTING
Martin Leetz

PROOFREADING
Nadja Breger

TRANSLATION
Paul Harris

INTERNS
Marie Born, Miriam Laage, Verena Koll, Anne Schübel, Leo Weiß

ADMINISTRATION
Nicole Golombek, Heike Herrmann, Gaby Sawer

LIBRARY
Martin Malewski

SECRETARIAT
Ulrike Akin

PUBLIC RELATIONS
Judith Glaser

SUPPORTING PROGRAM
Agostina Andreoletti, Iris Kaebelmann, Heike Herrmann

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM
Peter Mesenhöller (Museumsdienst)

JAPAN FOUNDATION, COLOGNE
Director Keiichi Aizawa, Angela Ziegenbein

MUSEUM SHOP AND SOCIETY
Katharina Krebs, Ursula Metz

CURATORIAL TEAM
Annabelle Springer, Walter Bruno Brix

PARTICIPATING ARTISTS, ACTIVISTS AND SCIENTISTS
Caroline Bräuer, Petra Czerwinske, Carl Deubner, Asami Hosokawa, Yukiko Kaizawa, Boris Labbé, Stephanie Lüerßen, Mayunkiki (Mai Hachiya), Sonja Mohr, Ikuko Okada, Hans-Dieter Ölschleger, Maya Sekine, Birgit Scholz, Kanako Uzawa, Ryo Yonezawa

NATIONAL AIINU MUSEUM
Director Shiro Sasaki and Team: Yoshiki Oe, Yu’chi Uchida, Mio Yachita, Takeshi Yabunaka

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