

*S*WEDISH FOLK ART
ALL TRADITION IS CHANGE

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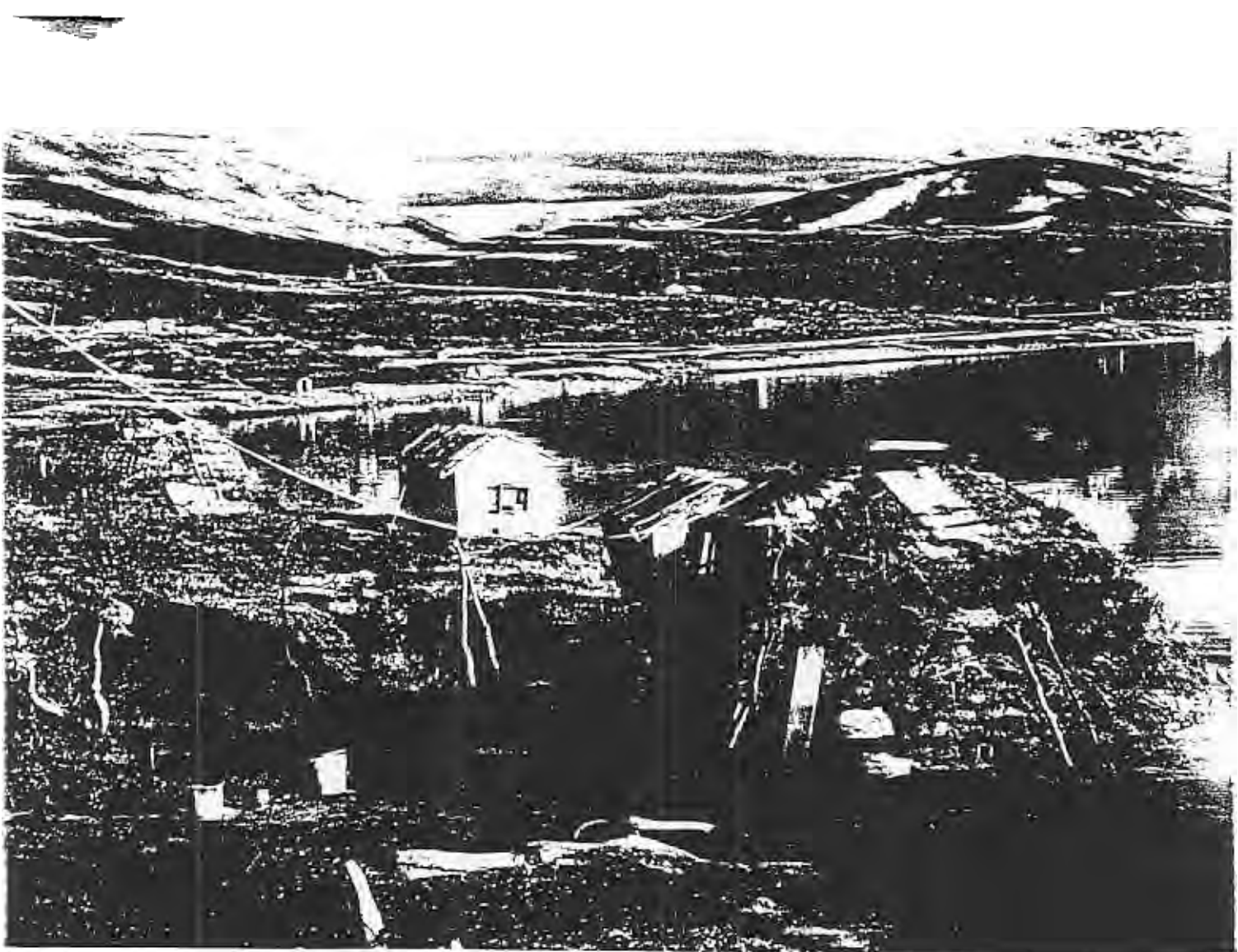
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S>A>A>M>I L:I:F:E A>N:D H A N D I C R A F T

Hugh Beach

A loudspeaker has just announced that a reindeer caravan will swing through the fairgrounds in half an hour, and the streets of Jokkmokk are already crammed with people readying their cameras in anticipation. It is early February in Lapland, above the Arctic Circle, and well below freezing, minus thirty degrees Fahrenheit, in fact. The many southern tourists attending the Jokkmokk Winter Fair, an annual event that has recurred without lapse since 1605, identify themselves by hasty, cramped movements or a kind of slow tramping in place caused by insufficiently warm footwear. Interspersed in the crowd stand small groups of locals renewing old acquaintances at a leisurely pace, with little regard for the reindeer caravan or the sale offers announced by the loudspeaker and advertised on signs over countless booths lining the streets. Here and there, one can spot someone in a bright-blue tunic bordered in yellow, green, and red, traditional Saami (Lapp) dress.

The Saami are indigenous people of Sweden, Norway, Finland, and the Kola Peninsula of Russia. They have their own language, more related to Hungarian than to Swedish, and probably are best known to the rest of the world for their tradition of reindeer herding. In Sweden, the Saami number between seventeen and twenty thousand, but of these, only about 10 to 15 percent depend upon the herding livelihood. Nonetheless, reindeer herding is of fundamental importance to all Saami. The reindeer is guardian of their culture, their language, and identity. Their remaining special resource rights are commonly bound to the herding occupation; yet, the Saami preoccupation with reindeer stretches far beyond the resource rights practiced by the herders alone. The herding lifestyle is regarded as the source of their culture and the flame that keeps their identity as Saami alive.

The Jokkmokk Winter Fair was not and is not the only fair or market in Lapland. They were spread throughout the north at key locations. There were good reasons, some of which are still valid today, for holding trading fairs in the dead of winter. Travel by reindeer caravan was good; fur-bearing animals could provide thick winter skins for trade; and the Saami were with their reindeer in the lowland forest zones and could congregate at church stations where they would be met by Crown authorities, registered, married, and taxed. For the Saami, it was the time to stock up on basic provisions for the rest of the year and to transport them by reindeer sled back to winter camp. The Fair was also an occasion to meet friends and to party. People in Jokkmokk still reckon time according to whether an event was pre- or post-Fair. The Fair continues to be a time to buy supplies and to make "good deals," but the kinds of things stocked in the booths have changed. Now one can find the same array of plastic trinkets, candy, and compact disks sold at fairs to the south. A Lapland flavor is preserved, however, by reindeer-sled racing on the frozen lake, by booths selling hot reindeer-meat sandwiches to compete with the ever-present hot dogs, and by the wealth of Saami handicraft work, *duodji*, sold everywhere.

What follows is a highly individualized and selective account of Saami handicraft. Though not complete, one hopes it does capture the basic essence of Saami handicraft and illuminate some of its most pressing problems.

Hanging from the belt of almost every Saami at the Fair is a beautiful Saami knife, sheathed in reindeer antler or wood and etched with patterns passed down through the generations. The knife



TRADITIONAL SAAMI LANDS

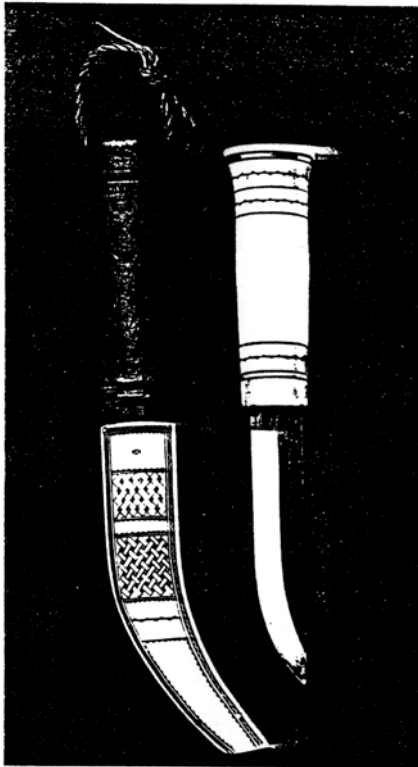
OPPOSITE:

Saami reindeer herder dwellings by Lake Virihaure. The birdcage-like construction on top is made to support a piece of canvas tilted against the wind to keep the rain out but letting smoke escape.

BELOW:

At the Jokkmokk Winter Fair, the fair-ground stalls offer a mixture of candy and handicraft. Hot reindeer-meat soup is served inside the Saami tent dwelling, while outside, Saami women sell traditional reindeer-skin winter shoes.





is an essential, ever-present tool and eating utensil for those living on their ancestral lands, engaged in a lifestyle close to nature. A Saami feels naked without a knife, and if one watches carefully, one can usually see a hand move to the hip and a thumb brush the handle of the knife in an unconscious reflex to check that it is still there every time a reindeer herder stands up.

The Saami certainly do not seem encumbered by an overly conservative reliance upon traditions. On the contrary, they pride themselves on keeping up with the latest “high-tech” equipment and employ modern tools, walkie-talkies, and helicopters, whenever they prove useful. Yet, the Saami knife retains its place on the belt, and the reindeer-antler eyelet serves on every lasso, even if the lasso itself is made of the newest type of synthetic fibers encased in plastic. Put simply, the herders like to use whatever is best for the job, and that frequently entails the continued use of their traditional handicrafts.

At the Fair, visitors can scour the booths looking, comparing, and becoming more and more confused by what they find. The spectrum of type, quality, and price is broad. In one booth, Saami knives, ribbons, leather bags, and wooden drinking cups hang in a jumble from a hook in large clusters. In another, a few items—the extraordinary knives of Sune Enoksson, for example—are displayed in a locked glass case. This, of course, is to be expected. What bothers the newcomer is the inability to understand why one item is so much more valued than another. Certainly, even newcomers can see differences in the quality and the care with which articles are made, but they will soon come to realize that the basis of their judgment is extremely narrow. You see differences that you cannot evaluate, and there is much more that you simply do not see.

For example, you do not note the difference between reindeer-skin bags sewn with reindeer sinew and those sewn with dental floss. (Sinew thread has the property of swelling and shrinking with the leather in wet and dry weather and will therefore not tend to tear into the leather as will ordinary fiber thread during these changes.) You might fail to see the initials by which most Saami artisans, professionals or not, identify themselves on their products out of pride in their work. You do not realize that the leather casing sewn onto a Saami knife sheath should be in thick, raw hide, not in soft leather. You do not know to judge pewter thread embroidery by the frequency, regularity, and tightness of the practically invisible stitching. Some of the items carry a tag proclaiming them to be genuine Saami handicraft work, but others, equally fine and genuine, have no such tag. I was shocked to find that one of the few knives I could afford was actually made in Hong Kong, although it was obviously designed to pass as a Lapland product with a fake reindeer-antler handle engraved with a reindeer head.

The next day, I returned to view the same handicraft with a Saami friend who had promised to advise me. (It reminded me of the first time I wore eyeglasses.) He immediately spotted flaws in construction, poor choice of materials (for example, too much marrow, causing weakness, in an important piece of reindeer antler), and matters of design that simply irritated his sensibilities. I decided—as per good anthropological credo—that the best way for me to learn to appreciate Saami handicraft was to try to do it myself. After all, most of the herders I had come to know had made their own handicraft articles. While there are exceptionally skilled Saami artisans whose production extends to a wide circle and who make a living by this alone, most of the Saami linked to the herding livelihood are capable artisans, and some of them are virtuosos. Besides doing handicraft for the family’s own needs, they might make a few extra items during the dark winter nights to supplement their incomes. Usually, however, the herding occupation keeps them too busy. I did not suspect then that in attempting to imitate them and make my own gear for the field, I was blundering headlong into a difficult and painful battle over cultural property.

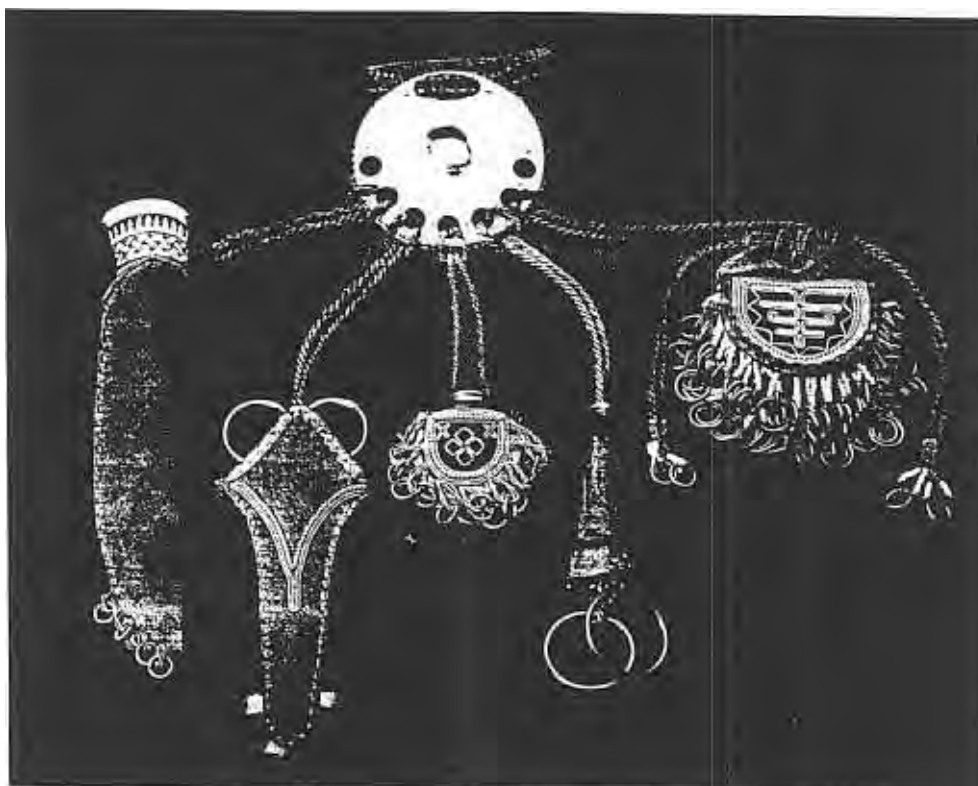
CULTURAL THREAT

Perhaps I might have been more concerned with the position of Saami culture and the precarious situation of Saami artisans, rather than with my own desire to learn about Saami culture, but I was

a newcomer with limited insight. I failed to realize fully the connection between the knife made in Hong Kong that I had seen earlier, and the tags indicating genuine Saami work, as noticed on other articles. At the least, I did not understand that poor-imitation Saami handicraft posed a serious threat to local artisans. After all, I had come close to purchasing the Hong Kong knife and depriving a Saami artisan of a sale. So injurious has the influx of simulated items been to the local handicraft profession that Saami handicraft courses, once open to all, have been closed to non-Saami in an effort to stop the proliferation of their know-how and the production of handicraft competing with theirs on false pretenses.

It is important that the public be aware that such problems exist for the Saami and for many other peoples, and it is understandable that these minority cultures seek ways to protect themselves. Unfortunately, protectionism carries a high price. In mixed marriages, the non-Saami partner has often felt cut off from participating in Saami activities and thereby, despite the best intentions, is unable to help bring up the children within Saami culture. A minority people threatened by assimilation can ill afford to turn away those desiring to promote cultural maintenance. Moreover, such protectionism creates a debilitating dilemma with the public at large who would surely buy more Saami handicraft if only they knew more about it.

There probably will never be a complete resolution to this dilemma, but perhaps a compromise can be reached, whereby amateurs can feel free to imitate Saami handicraft without feeling guilty about contributing to cultural banditry. The real threat to the Saami is the commercialism of outsider simulations. No Saami would object to someone learning to make things in the Saami style for



OPPOSITE ABOVE:
This knife, with sheath of antler and hide and southern Saami ornamentation, was made by Ingemar Israelsson. The design is etched into the antler with a sharp knife; color contrast is made by soot or the red-brown substance from the inside bark of the alder tree (Private collection).

OPPOSITE BELOW:
Saami artisan Johan Fanki stitches rawhide onto an antler knife sheath. The rawhide is sewn on wet and dries to a snug fit around the knife handle. When inserted into its sheath, the knife snaps tightly into place and cannot be accidentally dislodged.

LEFT:
This belt tool hanger, holding a knife, scissors, thimble, needle case, and purse, was made by Lena Lundström of Vilhelmina. These items were standard gear for Saami women (Private collection).



ABOVE:
Baking bread inside a Saami dwelling. A good baking stone that does not crack under high temperature is hard to find and is passed down through generations. Nowadays seaplanes and snowmobiles have replaced reindeer caravans in bringing flour to mountain villages and have joined together modern appliances and ancient technology.

RIGHT:
The interior of a Saami tent dwelling is the subject of this photograph from the 1930s. Food to be smoked is hung high on the tent poles.



personal use. Of course, the making of certain articles of clothing that are strong identity markers might indeed cause indignation. However, this stems first and foremost not from the fear of competing commercialism, but from the sense of invaded ethnic integrity precisely on the personal level. While Saami might object to an outsider sewing a Saami tunic or *kolt*, the same person would probably only receive encouragement from Saami were he making his own knife.

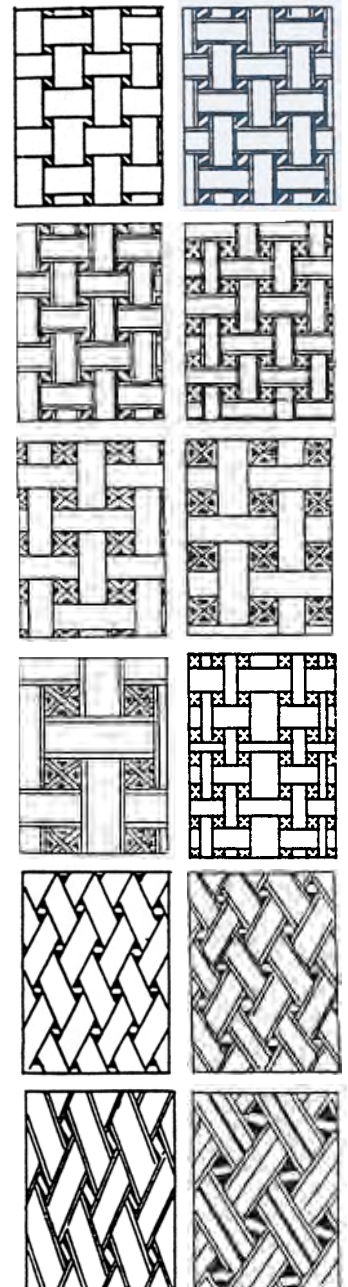
The unspoken rules of proper respect for ethnic integrity differ somewhat throughout Saami-land. It seems that in regions where the Saami are but a small minority mixed in with the majority population on the local level, the *kolt* is imbued with great symbolic significance and donned especially for ceremonial occasions. In other areas, where it ranks as more normal dress, its use by non-Saami might not be as provocative. The newcomer can gain a sense for the status of different Saami articles simply by observing what is offered to tourists for sale, and what is not. There are a few notable caveats to this rule of thumb, however. The markers of ethnicity are not so strictly upheld for children, their innocence seeming to rub off a bit onto the non-Saami parents who put a Saami hat on a child. If an adult *kolt* is put up for sale, it has most likely been heavily worn and is offered more in the hope that it will inspire appreciation as an exotic artifact for museumlike display than as something to wear.

In any case, there is plenty of indigenous handicraft that Saami would encourage an outsider to make for personal use if it were clearly understood that the skills involved would never be directed toward commercial production of Saami handicraft simulations. Naturally, there is no way of guaranteeing this, but if the point is clearly made and an honest answer demanded, risks are minimized and surely worth taking considering the alternative and certain injuries from a protectionistic stance.

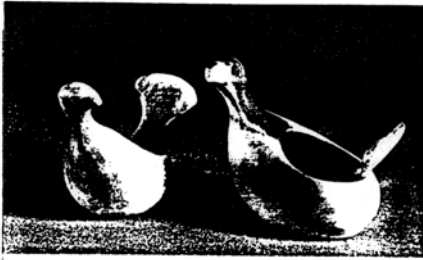
I persisted in my efforts to learn how to make Saami handicraft, and while I have never progressed beyond being a raw beginner and would never dream of selling anything I did make even if I could, I learned enough to feel the enthusiasm of thinking something through with my hands, to gain the understanding needed to appreciate the work of others, and to grasp the essential grammar of form and pattern in the dialogue between Saami tradition and creativity. Those professional Saami artisans who helped me learn fundamentals of their craft, Lars Pirak and Ellen Kitok, were proud to teach me from their vast stores of heritage. Neither they nor the many other Saami who have given me the benefit of their help and advice made me feel they were showing me secret knowledge. On the contrary, they were pleased to find an outsider so interested, and they were simply showing me the best way to make the necessities for life in the field. I made my own knife, my wooden burl drinking cup (in Saami, a *kosa*), and I braided my own shoe bands. They may not be according to all the Saami rules of design and standards of excellence, but they are my own, and I still use them.

ETHNIC IDENTITY MARKERS

One cannot help but grow attached to things that are with one constantly over a long period and are so necessary, especially if they are homemade. They become a part of one's personal identity. For the Saami, this is all the more true. The engraved patterns on a herder's knife and the angle at which the end of the antler sheath is bent commonly reflect the general region he comes from. Characteristic features can be traced through a family for generations. One particular variation on a traditional theme of engraving pattern, for instance, may even be enough to identify a specific artisan. In general, one finds more geometric patterns, circles, rhombuses, and wedges, to the south, while in the northern parts of Lappland, it is common to find flowery motifs and even representations of reindeer. There are a number of traditional variations on the so-called weave pattern of antler engraving on central and southern Saami articles, but a number of people have made their own unique patterns based on the old themes. A staggered pattern of black-and-white squares identifies almost certainly something made by Martin Kuorak, even if he does not want to claim credit for the creation of the style. Similarly, a weave pattern with perspective, which gives a new

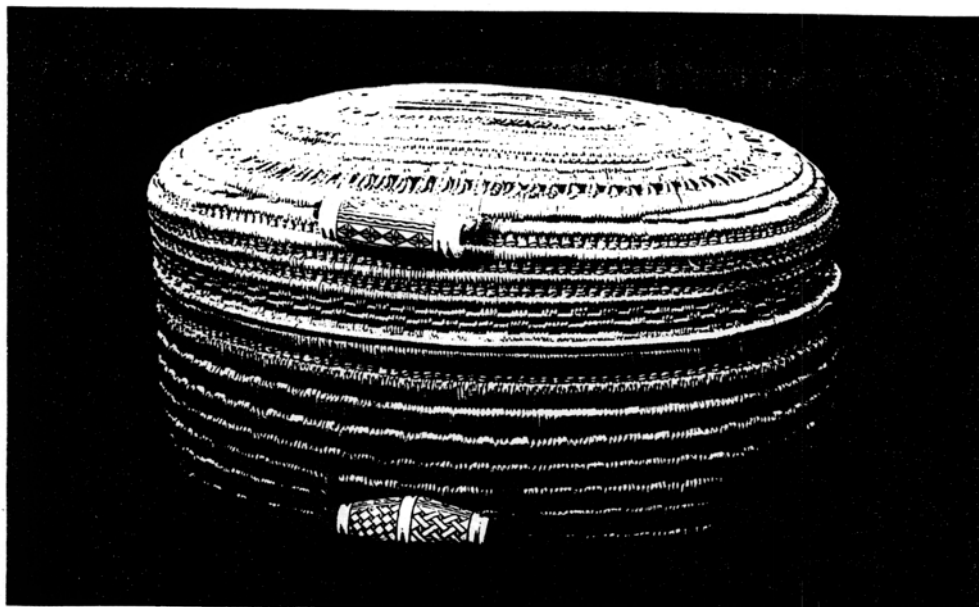


These examples of southern Saami weave-pattern antler ornamentation were created hundreds of years ago and are still in use today.



These contemporary saltcellars and spoons are made of antler. Shaped like ptarmigans, they were created by Lars Pirak; they are examples of the use of traditional materials and techniques to create nontraditional objects (Width approximately 2". Private collection).

This root basket, woven of birch roots and adorned with buttons of antler, is by Ellen Kitok-Andersson. Its form is based on a traditional Saami kisa, a wooden chest that holds valuables and breakables. The oval-formed kisa was in the past one of the most essential possessions of every nomadic Saami household (Width 6½". A'jte Saami Museum, Jokkmokk).



depth to the engraved surface or drapes itself like a flowing piece of cloth, points to the hands of Max Lundström.

As noted, Saami handicraft is also an ethnic identity marker for this group, even if Saami handicraft is not exclusively worn by them. This dimension of identity for the Saami, marked by their distinctive handicraft and traditional dress, is both similar and yet quite different from comparable dimensions relating to regional handicraft traditions within the rest of Sweden. Saami identity is stated largely in contradistinction to "Swedish" identity—an identity as a distinct Saami people, not simply as a regional part of a larger Swedish whole. While we have seen that within the general category of Saami handicraft there are well-defined regional differences, these are subordinated to the overall unity of Saami ethnic identity.

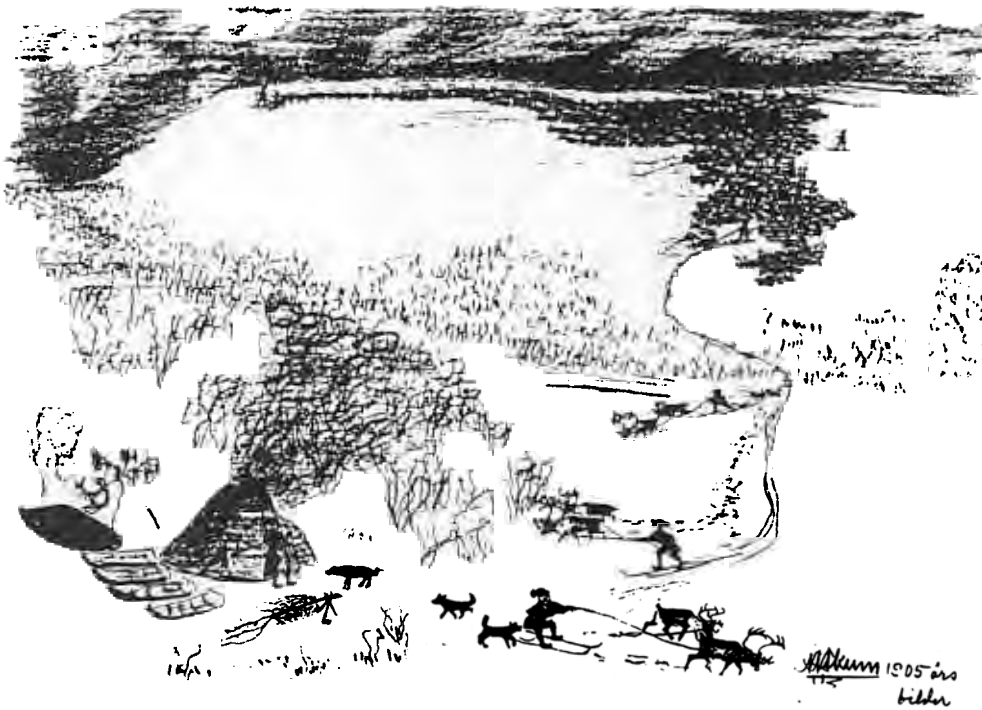
Fundamental to traditional Saami handicraft is its functionality, both its materials and forms being carefully chosen and refined through centuries of experience. It is a pity that so many articles of Saami handicraft are placed immediately on a display wall and see no service, their visual beauty obscuring the beauty of the collective, age-old knowledge that has made these articles so perfectly honed to their use in the Lapland environment.

I would never consider stepping into the mountains without my Saami knife, and after putting it to hard work for twenty years, I am still discovering new reasons to appreciate it. The antler sheath is practically indestructible; the leather casing at the top keeps it tightly in place even as I move through dense willow thickets. (As do the Saami, I have had to replace this "knife leather" every five or six years when it has worn out.) The characteristic curve at the bottom of the sheath is not only an accommodation to the formation of reindeer antler; the rounded end causes the knife to slide to the side when one sits on the ground or happens to have the knife jammed into a thigh when wrestling a reindeer buck, something that could result in serious injury were one wearing a pointed leather sheath.

Besides functionality, Saami handicraft is distinguished by a unique sense of style: rounded forms rather than sharp corners; beautiful geometric designs, commonly engraved by the point of a knife into a smooth, white antler surface and brought out in contrast by the rust-colored pigment of alder tree bark or simply by soot.

rubbed into the grooves. Customarily, men work in antler and wood, while women work in leather, fabrics, root basketry, and pewter thread. To those who know it, the Saami touch is unmistakable.

With the introduction of new materials, the transition to cash economy, and a more settled lifestyle, not to mention new modes of transportation, some of the old handicraft skills began to disappear. Basketry weaving with roots of birch and willow has only barely been rescued from oblivion, largely through the efforts of Asa Kitok and her daughters, Ellen and Margit. The Saami pewter-thread art has also been revived through the concerted efforts of individual Saami artisans. The Saami Folk High School in Jokkmokk, with its many courses in Saami handicraft, has been instrumental in regenerating much of Saami handicraft. During the last forty years, Saami handicraft has seen a remark-



LEFT:
As depicted by Nils Nilsson Skum, in early spring a nomadic herding group has reached the high mountains where new calves will be born. Sleds are unpacked, and meat is hung to dry on a rack. Herders are on skis behind tame ox-deer.

BELOW:
A Saami shaman beats his drum and goes into a trance in this illustration from Schefferus, *Lapland*, published in 1673. A description tells us that "he begins to beat his drum, and falling on the ground remains there for some time unmovable, his body being hard as a stone. . . . And because they are fully persuaded that the soul of the drummer does actually leave his body and is carried to the place he names to them; they say that the soul is brought back by his Genius over the highest rocks and mountains with such swiftness that the sands and stones do fly about like hail."

able resurgence, becoming increasingly known throughout the world, bringing high prices able to support many full-time professionals, and seeding new forms of artistic expression.

THE OLD WITH THE NEW

New creations using old patterns and traditional materials abound. One can, for instance, find beautifully crafted pendants shaped like miniature Saami shaman drums, where the reindeer-antler "drum skin" is engraved with pre-Christian Saami drum motifs just like those painted on the drum skins of the sixteenth century. Popular among Saami and non-Saami alike are leather watchbands adorned with traditional Saami pewter-thread designs (once adorning reindeer harnesses and still gracing the belts and collar/chest-pieces of traditional Saami dress in certain areas). Lars Pirak's salt vessels, made from reindeer or moose antler in the shape of the ptarmigan with the handle of an antler spoon forming the tail, capture the bird's perky and curious tilt of the head. Many of the same artisans who practice traditional, functional handicraft also apply their traditional materials and skills to works of pure decorative and artistic expression; for example, the reindeer-hide wall tapestries with scenes of the herding life or of Saami mythology embroidered in pewter thread by Maj-Doris Rimpi. The statuettes by Lars Levi Sunna in wood and antler of figures from Saami



pre-Christian religion are another example. Some of these artisans have gone on to work in the nontraditional mediums of drawing and painting. One of the most well known Saami authors, Johan Turi (1854–1936), illustrated his book with his own highly original drawings. The famous pictures by Nils Nilsson Skum (d. 1951) are so detailed, informative, colorful, and artistic that they often assume the dominant position in much of his published work describing the herder's and hunter's life. Skum was a stickler for accurate detail, and his beautiful pictures are also of great ethnographic value.

Contact with the majority societies has meant broader markets, new means of expression, and new tools for the continuation of old traditions and for their continuing development. Most professional Saami craftsmen use a chain saw daily in working with hard reindeer antler and wood. Some have even installed dentist drills, which dramatically ease the job, for example, of gouging out the slot for the blade in the sheath knife. The ateliers of Saami handicraftsmen commonly smell of hot ground bony material reminiscent of the dentist's office. These new devices ease much of the least skilled common drudgery of the artisan's work, promoting increased production without loss of quality. Through long discussions about the changing quality of antler material when subjected to the heat of modern saws and drills, I have been astounded to learn how much the artisans are aware of the effects of their new tools and how careful they are not to let such things damage the quality of their products.

There always will be people who willingly sacrifice quality for quantity and profits; but the tag identifying genuine Saami work is not simply distributed among Saami freely without quality controls. The handicraft bearing such a tag must uphold certain well-defined standards. The Swedish Saami Handicraft Commission of Same Átnam has established quality control checks. None of my herding friends who made a little handicraft on the side bothered to obtain these tags even if their work easily qualified. This was something for the full-time professionals, they figured, but if anyone did careless work, he or she would never escape the critical eyes and tongues of the neighbors.

Impact with the majority society has also had negative sides for Saami handicraft. In the early centuries of colonial contact, the practice of Saami shamanism was considered consorting with the devil. The main shamanic instrument of the Saami, the drum, with which the shaman would go into a trance and travel to other worlds, was regularly confiscated and burnt. The Saami were for-

According to early missionaries, Saami shamans communicated with the devil, as represented in this illustration from Schefferus, Lapland, published in 1673.





During spring migration herders on skis and dogs drive the herd. Snowmobiles serve as backup for bringing in strays and for hauling supplies.

bidden to use the drum, and now, less than a hundred old drums remain in museum collections. They hint of a complex, philosophically sophisticated worldview of which we now know little. Figures painted with the juice of alder bark depicting spirit animals, celestial bodies, and other unknown entities covered the drum skin. Today, the drum is making a comeback, mainly as a powerful symbol of Saami heritage, but even upon occasion in its former role as part of a modern shamanic revival, a revival that for most Saami is viewed as more related to the exercise of Saami identity than with belief in the old shamanic world order.

INDUSTRIAL EXPLOITATION

Of major economic impact to Saami artisans is the Swedish ruling that utilitarian objects are subject to a high value-added tax (VAT) from which objects of "pure art" are exempt. Despite a wide spectrum in the mixture of functionality and artistic adornment in traditional Saami handicraft, it is all counted for tax purposes as utilitarian. The tax cuts into the artisan's profits, in turn running up the price of the handicraft and inhibiting sales. I could well understand the bitterness of a prominent Saami artisan who had sold a beautiful new drum but had been unable to avoid the tax: "First it is decreed that we must forevermore refrain from using the drum, and then we are told it is a utilitarian object." I have been told by a number of handicraft professionals that this tax ruling tends at times to steer their work. Much more money can be made in the same amount of time by painting pictures of reindeer in oil than by making traditional handicraft from their antlers or hides.

There does not seem to be any ready solution to this predicament; if all functional objects that include some ethnic ornamentation were exempt from the VAT, before long, folk art would adorn everything from refrigerators to telephones. Alternatively, if all human artifacts were taxed indiscriminately, works of art would take a hard beating and probably decrease. It may be difficult to suggest a remedial social policy change on this score, but it is not so difficult to understand the effect of the current policy on the artisans.

These two reindeer-leather handbags are good examples of contemporary Saami handicrafts. The one on the left, adorned with pewter-thread embroidery, is by Ella-Margit Nutti of Gällivare. The use of pewter thread is far more common than the colorful beadwork decorating the bag on the right (Private collection).



Another major impact of contact has been the unfortunate destruction of much of the Lapp-land environment by the building of hydroelectric power dams, mining, and large-scale logging. Professionals complain about the diminishing supply of birch burls for the making of drinking cups, and the reduced quality of reindeer antler due to deterioration of grazing lands. More immediately traceable is the reduced access to (and raised prices of) reindeer antlers that artisans experience, because of competition from the Asian market, where the antlers are prized as medicinal promoters of sexual potency.

Besides being subject to environmental exploitation and the whims of the global market, the Saami artisans' access to raw materials has been stiffly regulated by law. It is only very recently, with changes in Swedish Saami legislation enacted in July 1993, that Saami artisans gained recognition of their right to extract raw materials (such as wood, roots, and birch bark) necessary for their trade from Crown lands in their immediate region. Saami handicraft is certainly not something practiced in isolation by a conservative elite untouched by the world around them.

MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES

Of course, one can learn much about Saami handicraft just by looking at a lot of it. But one of the main benefits of trying to make it is that one experiences the difficult task of obtaining the right raw materials, those which the finished products present as givens. The roots used for basketry, for example, must be dug by hand in as long single strands as possible, then washed and debarked—a tedious process. Extra root branches and unevenness must be cut away before the roots can be sorted for use according to size. Prior to being woven into a basket with a pointed antler or bone awl, the roots are soaked in warm water and frequently even split. A glance at one of Ellen Kitok's root brooches reveals roots that are less than a millimeter in diameter, some with different shades and traces of bark remaining to add contrast. By artfully combining many different kinds of knot-

ting techniques in both open or closed spirals, she makes elegant and airy bridal crowns, or solid, water-tight containers.

Wooden drinking cups and milking vessels must be made from the burls that form on certain birch trees. The wood in such burls is twisted, resulting in a surface of remarkable beauty, but also in a vessel that will not split during repeated wetting and drying. Once taken from the tree, the burl is usually hollowed out in rough fashion immediately before being boiled in water to remove the juice, and then left to dry in a covering of glue. Dry, cured wood is much harder and more difficult to hollow out. The glue prevents the newly cooked vessel from splitting as the wood comes to cool and dry to its permanent form and density. During this drying process, however, the vessel might warp, ruining its symmetry. It is important, therefore, that one not press too far in hollowing it out initially. The walls must be left thick enough to be reworked into new symmetry if the vessel should warp. Since thin walls warp more readily, this is a stage to be attained once the vessel is dry and fully stable.

Factory-made pewter thread can be bought by the meter in sewing shops in Lapland, but Saami artisans will commonly still make their own. Bars of pewter are cut into a number of smaller caliber rods, which are then pulled repeatedly through holes in a piece of antler. As the pewter is pulled through the snug-fitting hole, it gradually grows thinner and longer. It is then pulled through a somewhat smaller hole, and the process is repeated through a long series of holes of diminishing size until the pewter is so thin as to be spun tightly around a central core fiber. It is quite a sensitive operation, and many a Saami woman has cursed the unwitting person who has opened the door at the critically wrong moment, causing the temperature to fall and the delicate, unfinished thread to break into pieces. Once the pewter thread has been prepared, there still remains the careful, time-consuming work of sewing it into place in folds and snowflake patterns on a leather or a sturdy felt background.

The preparation of hides has always been toilsome. Scraps of meat and sinew must be scraped off. The hides must be staked down under a running stream of water until the hair loosens easily. They must be tanned one or more times in a large cauldron containing a brew cooked from strips of tree bark, usually birch, and then stretched and kneaded while drying so that they become soft and flexible. Some hides might not be tanned in this way in order that they remain white and provide artistic contrast to the regular brown leather when used together. Even the spinning of strands of reindeer tendon into the sinew thread (held with the teeth, the fibers being twined against the cheek or on the thigh) is also a refined skill. Tendons from different parts of the reindeer can be chosen for different purposes.

I have many fond memories of sitting on a mountainside with a friend discussing the pros and cons of certain handicraft methods, or practicing engraving designs on wooden sticks before flinging them into the fire as we waited for the herd to be brought into the corral. Conversations about handicraft lead easily into philosophical questions and matters pertaining to Saami history and the reindeer-herding life. One can do it in an atelier with modern equipment, or one can do it on the trail with only an ax or a knife. It is always meditation. Most of the herders had grown up with it as a part of their everyday lives. They had practiced antler engraving as children, and can often be found adorning a piece of scrap antler or wood during a break in the work routine, just as I might doodle on a piece of paper at my desk. Antlers are hard, and it takes a steady hand and a lot of pressure to make a straight cut with the point of a razor-sharp blade. The hands of many Saami men are marked with sizable scars, from wounds acquired during childhood practice when the engraving knife slipped on the hard antler surface.

The knife I was intent on making for myself became somewhat of a collective effort by the handicraft professionals and herders I met. Everyone was willing to help out and hated to see me make a mess of it; I had to insist upon my prerogative to do my own less-than-perfect job. It did not take all that long to complete, and by the time it was done, while I was not good at it myself,



The "pulling" of pewter thread is shown in this illustration from Schefferus, Lappland, published in 1673. As the pewter is pulled through successively smaller holes in a piece of reindeer antler, the thread grows longer and longer, thinner and thinner.

As this photograph illustrates, the "pulling" of pewter thread today is very similar to the way it was illustrated by Schefferus in 1673.



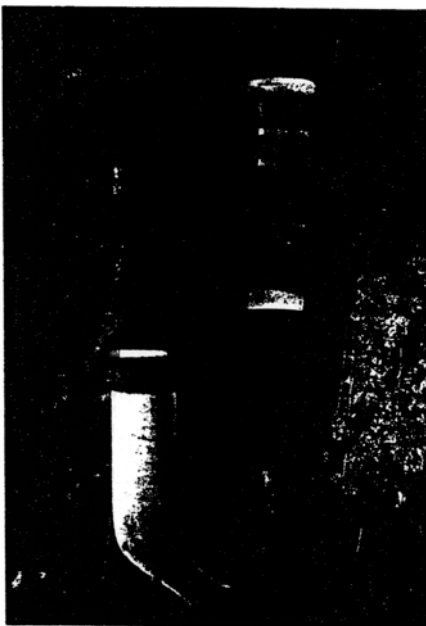


RIGHT:

A Saami family travels with their infant in a komse strapped to a tame ox-deer, in this illustration from Schef-ferus, *Lappland*, published in 1673.

BELOW:

Henrik Blind of Stenträsk, Lappland, made this knife with a handle in traditional Saami colors. Innovation and custom are masterfully integrated in the handle, in which layers of birch bark alternate with pieces of plastic, some from a windshield discarded from a snowmobile. One of Blind's houses can be seen on p. 98.



I had acquired a critical eye by which to evaluate the work of others—or so I thought. Imagine my surprise when one of the herders, a man with consummate handicraft skills, showed me a knife he had just made for himself with pieces of clear plastic alternating with wood and antler in the handle.

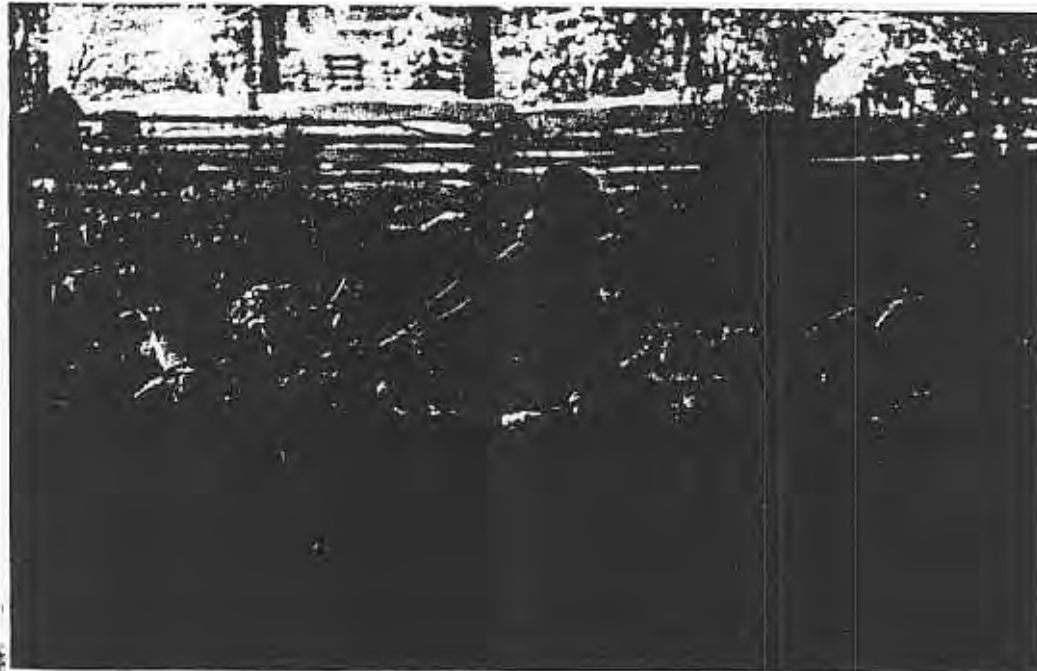
He had taken the plastic from a ruined snowmobile's windshield—good material, he assured me, since it was tough, would not crack, would not be ruined by snow and water, and was also just a tad spongy so that it made a tight seal against the other handle sections when they were all riveted together on the blade shaft. He had done it with style, the plastic pieces forming a pattern in relation to the other slices of antler and wood. The tasteful insertion of plastic gave the knife a modern flair. I have since seen many similar examples, especially in the work of herders who are little concerned about living up to the expectations of the market or carrying the banner of Saami traditional handicraft standards as an end in itself. To me these unorthodox, “bastard” articles are among the most fascinating and, paradoxically, are even traditional. Change on one level commonly derives from the desire to maintain more fundamental relationships constant. Originally, Saami handicraft was made to best serve the Saami in their work. Adopting new materials might be the best way to get an old job done. A traditional aspect of Saami handicraft has been its openness to both the demands and opportunities of a changing world. It has never become so dissociated from the needs of vital Saami occupations nor so “touristified” as to be reduced to a dogmatic and dead set of formulas.

It has been twenty years since my first Winter Fair in Jokkmokk, and I have been to many. Over the years, I have acquired more Saami handicraft items than I can utilize to the extent they deserve. Some of these are articles from a bygone age and are no longer in use even by the Saami herders, herding forms and lifestyles having changed so dramatically in just one generation. Rubber boots have replaced hand-sewn, watertight leather shoes; they were difficult to make, and a herder could easily wear out three pair in one summer. Similarly, much equipment designed for the bare-ground reindeer-pack caravans has been made obsolete by the coming of the seaplane or extension of roads into the mountainous regions. The *komse*, a wooden frame covered in leather with straps for carrying infants, is often still passed down within the family from generation to generation out of a sense of continuity with the past, and it is still a wonderfully practical piece of equipment, but it no longer is strung onto the pack saddle of a tame reindeer during migration.

Other articles I have come by because they mean something special to me. At my last Winter Fair, I ran into a herder whom I have known since he was a young boy, when I spent time in his family's spring/autumn camp. I knew him to be an excellent artisan, and so after we had talked a good while and even though he was not visibly selling any handicraft, I asked if he had not managed to make anything. Not much of anything, he assured me, but he dug from his pocket an exquisitely formed and ornamented antler spoon. "It's the old man's model," he said simply, and sure enough, I recognized it as a close look-alike to the spoon that his father, now deceased, had always carried. Not only the form of the spoon recalled his father, but also the ornamental pattern of the engraving on the handle, in part cut completely through with heart-shaped holes in northern Saami style. I ought to have it, since his father and I were friends, he added, and I would probably have given him my last dime for it, though he insisted on only a humble price. As a piece of handicraft, it was a work of beauty; as a memory of an old friend, it is invaluable to me.

This spoon epitomizes what Saami handicraft has come to mean to me—memories of those who have made it, or the shared memories of the time and place in which it was made; the early mornings waiting at the moose pass together, or the dark nights sitting by the open fire. Each of us puts something of himself into what he makes, and to me, these articles of handicraft have a magical quality linking through their use my hands with those that made them. It is like having a piece of a friend with you even if he is gone, and I wager I am not simply projecting such meanings onto objects that were not meant to hold them. Thoughts like these are worked into the antler, wood, or leather, as a father makes a knife for a son or a son makes a spoon like that of his father.

The Saami are fortunate indeed to have such a handicraft tradition, one that respects the past and yet allows for new individual expression; one that maintains old functions, yet adapts itself to new needs and possibilities. With its strong spirit as part of Saami identity, I do not fear for its continuation—unless we others in our blindness fail to appreciate this identity, despoil the reindeers' natural habitat, or otherwise regulate the Saami lifestyles out of existence.



In this reindeer count, a herder searches for reindeer with his ear-mark. While grazing land is held in common, reindeer are owned privately. Counts are necessary for taxation purposes, among other reasons.