Ivory Carving in Yakutia
National Identity and Processes of Acculturation

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Abstract: Within Russia, the major centers of bone carving art are the village of Kholmogory in the Arkhangelsk region, the town of Tobolsk in the Tyumen region (which was considered the center of Siberia in the seventeenth century), Chukotka, and the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia). Geographically, they are connected by their proximity to the northern seas, which explains the main materials used by carvers: walrus tusk and sperm whale tooth. The exception is Sakha (Yakutia), the ancient motherland of mammoths. This article discusses the origin and history of the development of Sakha mammoth tusk carving, the role of ethnocultural contacts at different stages of its development, and the preservation of its authenticity.

Keywords: ivory carving, mammoth ivory, mammoth tusk, Sakha (Yakutia)

During the Middle Ages the art of ivory carving was popular in East Asia, primarily within China, Japan, and India. In Russia, centers of ivory carving appeared in different historical periods, predominantly in the northern areas such as the regions of Arkhangelsk and Tyumen, in Sakha (Yakutia) and in Chukotka. The Chukchi ivory carving tradition is the oldest, dating back to the ancient Bering Sea period, or the beginning of the first century AD. Various objects made of walrus tusk were utilitarian objects used by Chukchi and Yupik sea hunters. Harpoon-heads, sacrificial troughs used for rituals of thanksgiving and the reconciliation of hunters with the spirits of prey animals, amulets and other objects all characteristic of that period were decorated with relief and engraved with sacred ornaments. Beginning in the eighteenth century, Chukchi craftsmen also carved small animal sculptures depicting whales, walruses and seals, with engravings along the entire length of the walrus tusk emerging in the twentieth century. Walrus
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tusk had been used as a material across Northern Russia for ivory carving until a more valuable and rare material emerged: mammoth ivory.

The frozen soils of the cryolite (permafrost) zone of the Arctic regions contain tusks, remains, and occasionally whole carcasses of giant woolly mammoths. These giants appeared on earth about 100,000—150,000 years ago and became extinct between 12,000 and 4,000 years ago (Lazarev et al. 2005: 28). Russia ranks first in the world for the extraction and export of fossil mammoth ivory, and according to some expert opinions, over 80 percent of all the mammoth ivory found in Russia has been discovered in Yakutia; an estimated 500,000 tons of the mammoth tusk remain underground (Concept of Development, Collection, Study 2017: 1).

Mammoth ivory was not extracted, traded, or used for crafts until the end of the eighteenth century. Even, Evenk, and Yukaghir indigenous people imagined the mammoth as a dangerous monster who lived underground; only a shaman, as a mediator, could communicate with a mammoth’s spirit during ritualistic journeys to the mythic Lower World (Fedorova and Sleptsova 2019: 164). These superstitious beliefs explain why people did not often use mammoth ivory as material to make everyday objects. Instead, they made daggers, knives, and spears using moose ribs, while the antlers and hooves of moose and deer were used to make spoons, women’s jewelry, and belt buckles. Plates for reindeer harnesses were made with reindeer, red deer, and moose antlers and decorated with small notches or solar circles depicting the sun. Mammoth ivory was rarely used, though sometimes was employed in making sewing needles, arrowheads, and smoking pipe heads, often following a ritual asking for the animal’s forgiveness.

In the Sakha folkloric narratives, the mammoth is depicted as a mystical creature called uu oghuha (the bull of icy water) who sent hard frosts during winter. The tusks of the uu oghuha were owned by sir ichchite (the spirit of the earth), and people did not dare to take his wealth (Ivanov 1979: 14). The Sakha people learned how to process plain livestock bones relatively early, which has been confirmed by finds of arrow tips made with the tarsus bone of livestock animals rather than mammoth ivory dating back to the difficult period of kyrgyz ujete (the wartime of the Middle Ages). The situation changed when the mass export of mammoth tusk from the northern peripheries of Yakutia began. Statistical data confirmed that “between the mid-eighteenth and beginning of the twentieth century estimated 700–2,000 puds or on average 25 tons of mammoth ivory was excavated in the Russian Arctic annually”1 (Lazarev et al. 2005: 100).
The Sakha scholar Vladimir Ivanov argued that artistic mammoth ivory carving in Sakha (Yakutia) replaced the utilitarian carving of animal bone in the eighteenth century and that the Kholmogory carving style from the Russian North had a significant influence on establishing this art during its initial stages (Ivanov 1979: 8–14). The period coincides with the time of mass export of mammoth ivory from Sakha (Yakutia). Why did the ivory carving craft emerge in this area so relatively late, despite rich reserves of mammoth ivory so well preserved in permafrost and despite ancient native traditions of wood and metal carving? The reason lies in the taboo that prohibited taking the mammoth tusks—“the horns of the Bull of Icy Water”—that belonged to the spirit of the earth. But times and morals were changing. Sakha (Yakutia) became part of the Russian Empire in 1632, bringing major changes to the social, economic, and cultural life of the Sakha people. The Christianization of the local population was one of the most important aspects of the colonial policy of the Russian state. The Orthodox missionary work in Sakha (Yakutia) was softer and not as violent as in other areas of the Russian Empire. The Sakha people converted to Christianity while remaining pagans; shamanism remained the main religion and was even adopted by local ethnic Russians. Nevertheless, time changed traditional beliefs and transformed the worldviews of local people and craftsmen. They bravely started using the sacred mammoth ivory to carve beautiful objects that were in demand among wealthy citizens. Before starting work, the craftsmen performed a ritual asking the spirits of earth and water for forgiveness, offering the spirit of fire libations of kumys and butter. The Russian merchants from Arkhangelsk gubernia exported tons of mammoth tusks from Sakha (Yakutia). In exchange they brought, among other products, a range of walrus ivory objects carved by the craftsmen from Kholmogory. For the first Sakha ivory carvers these objects—boxes, clock-cases, table clock-stands, snuffboxes, combs—became examples to copy and emulate. The Sakha craftsmen, long before the arrival of the Russians, were known as skillful carpenters and wood carving artists, blacksmiths and silversmiths, leather and fur craftspeople; as mentioned, ordinary utilitarian household objects had long been carved using horn and the tarsus bones of livestock instead of the walrus tusk popular with the North Russian Kholmogory carvers.

The bone carving school of Kholmogory was formed in the seventeenth century in the Russian North in the area on the coast of the White and the Barents seas. The inhabitants of Kholmogory, located on the Northern Dvina River, hunted the sea animals—walruses and
seals—and traded with “fish tooth” (as walrus tusk was called at the time), making simple bone carving products of it. Over the course of the eighteenth century, bone carving flourished. The mechanic-engineer Andrei Nartov invented a lathe upon which complex products from bone and wood could be turned out. Tsar Peter I, Empress Catherine II, and Grand Duchess Maria Feodorovna were fond of bone carving and used Nartov’s lathe (Matveev 1993: 9–13). Carving acquired elite qualities that satisfied the sophisticated tastes of the Russian nobility. For the elite public, carvers in the workshops of St. Petersburg created medallions with portraits of tsars, church utensils, boxes, vases, cups, smoking pipes, snuffboxes, chess pieces, and so on. They used flat-relief, open-work (lacy) cutting, high relief, and round-shaped relief techniques of carving. For decorative purposes the products were colored with natural dyes, or colored paper or foil was placed under the openwork pattern. The main material was walrus tusk, as the ivory imported from Africa and India was rare and highly valued. When the mammoth bone was obtained from the north of Sakha (Yakutia), it was bleached to make it look like ivory then it was sawn along the layers to avoid cracking and for getting a thin plate. Thus, this rare and expensive material was saved. Typical elements of the Russian ornament were the “shell” ornament with exquisite elements of rocaille curls and the so-called herbal ornament—a magnificent large-scale drawing of herbs, flowers, birds, fantastic animals. Today Arkhangelsk remains the center of the North Russian carving art.

Since the eighteenth century Tobolsk has been known as one of the largest carving centers in the Russian North along with Kholmogory, Sakha (Yakutia) and Chukotka. The Khanty, Mansi, and Nenets peoples all took part in the formation of the Tobolsk style, which used mammoth tusk as well as deer and moose antlers. Early craftsmen created small utilitarian, artistically designed items, such as various boxes, snuffboxes, and paper knives, much like in Kholmogory. They developed techniques for creating a miniature three-dimensional sculpture from mammoth tusk or, more rarely, of sperm whale tooth. The main themes were animals, gradually giving way to depictions of the lives of Siberian indigenous peoples. Tobolsk carving style was characterized by dynamism, expressiveness of silhouette, and narrative character. Decorative and ornamental elements were applied sparingly. Contemporary Tobolsk carving art, now mostly produced in Salekhard, is characterized by small sculptural scenes from the life of hunters, fishermen, and mythological compositions inspired by folk legends of the Iugra region. The works of contemporary craftsmen M. Timergazeev...
and his sons, M. Sandlerskaya, I. Vishnyakova, M. Rodenko, and M. Yusupov, all showcase the trend toward a decorative, fairy-tale interpretation of traditional themes.

**Early Sakha Carving**

It took the Sakha craftsmen, experienced in woodcarving and silver engraving, only a short time to master this new kind of craft; they were quickly able to develop various techniques of ivory carving and bring their creativity onto the national scene. One can see that the early works of local Sakha craftsmen were stylistically different from the Russian carving, both in the technique of processing the material and throughout the entire system of decorative design. In the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century the Sakha carvers only outwardly repeated the samples of the Kholmogory objects. They worked with mammoth tusk without a lathe, by hand with simple metal tools. Rectangular and round boxes brought from the Russian North usually had a wooden base to which thin ornamented bone plates were attached and colored or supplemented with colored paper under a complex cut-through lacy pattern. Sakha craftsmen copied the shape and composition of such boxes, but they carved the sides, top, and bottom of one-piece solid bone without a wooden base in accordance with the artistic taste and their former experience of carving wooden women’s sewing boxes. Compared to the elegant festive creations of the Kholmogory masters, the similar works of Sakha craftsmen look massive and austere. They are characterized by the motif of modest mesh ornamentation, which serves as a background for genre scenes on the sides and tops of boxes, table clock-stands, and combs. Attention is drawn to typical scenes, naive in their simplicity, from the lives of pastoralists (Sakha people are traditionally horse and cattle breeders) and hunters. The depictions also include rituals of the *kumys* drinking, dancing the national round dance *ohuokhai*, and scenes from shaman’s rituals; the craftsmen essentially depicted the most characteristic, typical events of their life in a generalized way without overloading them with complex ornaments.

The objects were of utilitarian nature, as these were often commissioned as a gift item, though some were very specific and peculiar in style. The box from the collection of the State Historical Museum in Moscow made by a Sakha master in 1799 became a pattern for the next generations of ivory carvers of the early twentieth century (Figure 1). On the front side of the box against the background of an open-work
oblique mesh ornament, a figure of a man with sacks sitting on a sled is cut; a man is driving a deer to a rawhide tent (traditional rawhide conic dwelling of the northern indigenous nomadic peoples); on the lateral sides of the box there are scenes of squirrel and bear hunting. The sloped panels of the top made with the through-cut technique, have inscriptions in capital letters in Russian: ЯКУТСКЪ (YAKUTSK), КЛТД (Russian abbreviation of Kogo liubliu, tomu dariu [presented to the one I love]) and ВЗП (Russian abbreviation of V znak pamiati [in memory]), and the year 1799. Such inscriptions were especially popular for the combs given as gifts. Sometimes the name of a person to whom the gift was intended for was engraved on a comb and an ornate open-work ornament was created with the letters of the name (Figure 2).

In the works of the first half of the nineteenth-century ornamental motifs became more complex. The slanting mesh coexisted with floral patterns, and to familiar images of deer and bears, an eagle and a centaur were added, which was undoubtedly influenced by the works of Russian carvers. At the same time the eagle and centaur are sacred figures in Sakha folklore and epic poetry and are also found in other types of Sakha folk art. In the nineteenth century fur coats with a protective

Figure 1. Box. Mammoth tusk. Three-dimensional carving, relief. 22 x 15 x 15. 1799. State Historical Museum. Moscow.
application in the form of wings on the back were presented to brides as an expensive wedding gift. They were called khotoidookh son (a fur coat with an eagle) (Material and Spiritual Culture of the Peoples of Yakutia 2017: 99–104). An eagle was also the totem for several Yakut clans. According to a Sakha legend, a centaur-like horse was one of the progenitors of the Sakha. In the nineteenth century a crowned lion and a centaur-unicorn opposing each other were frequently engraved on boxes, double-sided combs, and on bows of festive saddles. According to the archaeologist D. Savinov (2005), this motif is a reflection of the early medieval Turkic tradition and symbolizes a range of meanings from power, war, and victory to wishes of prosperity and well-being. The ancient Turkic symbol was borrowed for the flat Russian carving, which in its turn was borrowed by the Sakha craftsmen with their ancient Turkic roots, thus preserving the ancient sacred meaning of blessings, but on new ground.

Figure 2. Double-sided comb with the images of a lion, a unicorn and two hearts with the inscription ПМП, Кого люблю тому дарю, 1743 года, Якутскъ ("PMP, I present this to whom I love, in the year 1743, Yakutsk." Mammoth tusk. Open-work (lacy) carving. State Historical Museum. Moscow.
From the first half of the eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, ivory carving emerged and developed as a new Sakha folk craft. Having creatively reworked the experience and traditions of the North Russian ivory carving in accordance with the aesthetic tastes and worldview of their own culture, Sakha craftsmen developed an original dynamic carving style of decorative design for practical objects. However, at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the imagery and style of the creative works by the Sakha tusk carvers changed again. The overall socioeconomic crisis in the country and the world political events of that period affected the arts in general, with Russian handicrafts and artistic ivory carving suffering in particular. The demand for large artworks of utilitarian ivory objects had decreased and individual commissions had declined too. Craftsmen of the time then carved for sale a range of rather plain, small-sized utilitarian items of low artistic quality, such as combs and knife handles without ornaments. For instance, two-sided combs, used for hygienic purposes, were in popular demand among Sakha buyers.

At the same time a new direction appeared: three-dimensional sculptural miniatures. These were models of structures and compositions with everyday motifs of an ethnographic nature that were in demand for art exhibitions and industrial fairs. Such demand was inspired by the growing international scientific interest in the material and spiritual culture of the indigenous peoples of Siberia and the Arctic North. Well-known researchers of Siberian cultures such as Vatslav Seroshevsksii, Richard Maak, and members of the Sibiriakov scientific, ethnographic expedition including Nikolai Vitashevsksii, Eduard Pekarskii, Vladimir Bogoraz, and Vladimir Jochelson devoted their scholarly works to Sakha culture while also contributing to the Sakha ethnographic collections in the museums in Russia and Germany. In 1900–1902, the American North Pacific Jesup expedition led by Vladimir Jochelson and Vladimir Bogoraz collected rich material on numerous indigenous cultures of the North of Siberia: the Evenk, Even, Koryak, Chukchi, and Sakha. All ethnographic material gathered during this expedition, according to the terms of the agreement, was passed on to the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Among the collected ethnographic materials were numerous Yakut mammoth ivory carvings of the late nineteenth century (Ivanova-Unarova 2017: 339–353). At the same period, museum collections in Russian and European cities also received Yakut mammoth carvings following the Universal Exhibitions in Paris (1867), Vienna (1873), the All-Russian Exhibition in Nizhny Novgorod (1896) (Material and Spiritual Culture of the Peoples of Yakutia in World Museums 2017, 2018).
The Model of a Sakha Setting

A composition with multiple figurines called the Model of a Sakha Setting (Model’ iakutskoi obstanovki) from the collection of the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology in St. Petersburg (Kunstkamera), as the name of the composition implies, depicts a traditional Sakha household. On a small stand, an unknown Sakha craftsman presented the main types of the Yakut traditional dwellings: an uraha (summer house made with birch bark), a balagan (a winter log house), and various outbuildings. The composition is divided into three parts that depict various characteristic scenes of Sakha life: the ethnic kumys festival called the yhyakh, haymaking work, and an animal farm with fenced cows and horses. At the center of the composition are human figures engaged in work, dance, and leisure.

Of particular interest is the history of the mammoth ivory composition Yhyakh, a unique piece of art carved by a Yakut craftsman and acquired by the British Museum in London from the 1867 Universal Paris Exhibition circa 1867 (Figure 3). The model depicts in great detail the Ysyakh festival. The revered procession of the festival participants in ethnic dresses with ritual cups, chorons, in their hands are moving from an urasa, ornate conical summer birch-bark house to the tyusyulge, the sacred place of ritual kumys drinking. Here, under the young birch trees, special large containers with kumys are prepared for serving the drink. The composition is complemented by sports scenes and dances.

In 2015, almost 150 years later, people in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) finally got an opportunity to see this model in the city of Yakutsk. Scholars from the University of Aberdeen, United Kingdom—Tatiana Argounova-Low, Alison Brown, and Eleanor Peers—organized the loan of the model for the exhibition titled “A Century-Long Journey” at the National Art Museum in Yakutsk. It was a rare case that a Sakha ivory carving assisted academics to be awarded a research grant from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council to conduct a project focusing on the traditions of the Yhyakh festival from the nineteenth century to the present day. The exhibition stirred up great interest and tens of thousands of visitors came to see the composition.

After consultations with local craftsmen, historians, and art historians, the research team suggested that the original composition was possibly larger and that one half, likely, was lost back in the nineteenth century before it reached the exhibition in Paris. To address this the British Museum commissioned the second half of the composition and invited a well-known Sakha artist Fedor Markov to create the
missing part of the composition. The artist completed the commission and presented his vision of the contemporary *kumys* festival, displaying a variety of themes while not repeating the style of the nineteenth century. In the process, Markov respected ethnographic accuracy, thus acknowledging that the precise depiction of buildings, ritual items, and other aspects of life was a requirement at the turn of the century. The nineteenth-century craftsmen carved their models and depictions with great attention to detail. They perfected their models making sure that the dwellings had the correct shapes, and the viewers could have an impression of the materials used through their textures. The courtyards with horses and cows were clearly presented, but at the same time human beings in the models were usually depicted rather schematically, without the same level of detailed accuracy. Markov, as a contemporary artist, strove for ethnographic accuracy in conveying actions, buildings, people, and animals, but at the same time he used an unconventional way of depicting the conventional shape of *uraha*. He left it uncovered, thus providing a unique view inside the dwelling. Markov also introduced scenes of sports and horse racing competitions that were missing from the old model. The central figure of the

**Figure 3.** Composition “Ysyakh.” Mammoth tusk. Three-dimensional carving. 23 × 74 × 35.9. 1860s. British Museum. London. Cat. No. As. 5068.a. Photo M. Unarov.
composition is the shaman who conducts the blessing ritual and feeds the fire, as is still a custom at a present-day Yhyakh festival.

**Sakha Carving in the Twentieth Century**

While realism in depicting life in ivory carving composition was of scholarly interest in the nineteenth century, among local wealthy people there was a demand for ivory carvings too: boxes, combs decorated with open-work ornament were requested for gifts. The carvers turned again to the experience of the eighteenth century. The box from 1799 mentioned above was kept in the State Historical Museum in Moscow and became a model for the masters of the Meginskii ulus, which was famous for its dynasties of bone carvers. The boxes made by representatives of the Popov family in different years are kept now in collections of museums in Sakha (Yakutia) and abroad; a box made by Leontii Popov in 1906 is in the National Art Museum of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), one made by Nikolai Pavlov in 1904 is in the Museum of Local Lore in Yakutsk, and a box made in 1902 is housed in the American Museum of Natural History. All these boxes are similar in their form, ornamentation, and plot, although they are not exact copies of each other. From this fact we can conclude that the 1799 box was made by one of the first carvers of the Popov craftsmen dynasty. At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, during the difficult period of stagnation in art, craftsmen were forced to work according to ready-made old models in order to fulfill their rare orders and to sell combs, snuffboxes, and pipes of low quality at the market to earn their living.

The government of the Sakha Republic became concerned about the state of crafts in general and bone carving, in particular, and took steps to restore it. In 1909 three young bone carvers from Sakha (Yakutia) were sent to attend a two-year study program in the handicraft workshops of the town of Sergiev Posad near Moscow to advance their skills under the guidance of the famous master I. S. Khrustachev. However, Russian crafts were also in decline because of the lack of demand for art products. The young carvers were taught the skills of carving according to given patterns using a lathe. One of the students, Dmitrii Nikiforov, who did not see the possibility of further development of his creativity in Russia, was eager to learn the skills of carving from the Japanese masters, whose works had delighted him at the Museum of the Oriental Peoples in Moscow. In September 1917 he was sent to Japan but had to return home two months later because of a lack of funding.
amid the revolutionary events taking place in the country. However, the desire to master the secrets of Japanese carving art did not leave him. During the Soviet period Nikiforov requested a business trip to Japan on behalf of handicraft workshops and even received permission to travel. However, he was arrested in 1938, accused of being a Japanese spy. He was released two months later as the authorities exploited his talent for fulfilling important governmental orders. Nikiforov was officially rehabilitated only on October 13, 1999.

The best artists of the 1920s and 1930s—E. N. Alekseev, I. F. Mamaev, and D. N. Nikiforov—were commissioned by the government to make gifts to be given to honored guests: models of buildings and estates, chess figures, and souvenir knives. Such orders were rare, and the majority of carvers were engaged in making small items like smoking pipes, combs, and so on. The revival of bone carving art during the post–World War II period in Yakutia is associated with the names of Ivan Mamaev, Alexei Fedorov, Terentii Ammosov, Vasilii Popov, Dmitrii Il’in, Yegor Alekseev, and Dmitrii Nikiforov. They were no longer unknown folk craftsmen but the artists with their individual original styles that laid the foundations for new directions leading to the further strengthening of the Sakha style. They created boxes, chess figures, thematic compositions not for utilitarian purposes but for inclusion in art exhibitions. The main focus, or “calling card” of the Sakha ivory carving art became the three-dimensional small sculpture. The combination of monumental generalization with decorative elegance distinguished the small-form sculptural compositions of the late 1940s.

The composition “Sakha Woman at the Horse Tethering Posts” by Vasilii Petrovich Popov, a representative of the five-generation dynasty of carvers from Meginskii ulus became the model for the next generation of bone carvers (Figure 4).

The Yakut word for a horse tethering post is serge; it is a sacred place for a family or clan and an object of worship. As a utilitarian object it is simply a wooden post to which horses are tied, but the serge carries a deeper meaning in Sakha culture. Each serge in the composition has a carving on the top of the post, which has a symbolic meaning: the head of an eagle symbolizes a totem guardian of the family or clan, a horse head is the symbol of a sacred progenitor of the Sakha people, and the choron, a ritual cup for kumys drinking, symbolizes the wish for prosperity and well-being of the host family. The author of the composition carved rich decorations onto the horse harness and attended to the attire of the bride who came to the house of her fiancé with great detail. It should be noted here that the custom of putting up a serge
still persists, and occurs nowadays in Sakha (Yakutia) not only at family celebrations but at festivals as well.

Sakha bone carvers in the 1940s and 1950s used various techniques. While the composition “A Yakut Woman at the Horse Tethering Posts” by Popov was cut out of a single piece of bone, “Ysyakh” by D. I. Il’in was composed of several separate parts fixed onto a stand. Masters decorated small plates and snuffboxes with thematic reliefs, like the plate “The People’s Hero Vasilii Manchaary” by A. V. Fedorov, for example. Terentii Vasilyevich Ammosov was a virtuoso master in creating decorative household items, bas-relief portraits, genre compositions, and small sculptures. Working from the 1940s to the 1980s, Ammosov was the first master who turned to thematic boxes where the images of the plot were inserted in flat relief against the background of open-work

ornamentation (e.g., the boxes “The North” and “Stock-Breeding”). Ammosov’s favorite genre was chess, where classical chess figures were presented as the characters of the Sakha heroic epic poem *olonkho*\(^4\) with details of clothing, attributes, and emotional facial expressions in accordance with the plot of epic.

The brightest features that had become characteristic of Sakha carving during the second half of the twentieth century were embodied in the works of Stepan Nikiforovich Petrov and Semion Nikolaevich Pesterev. Themes of Petrov’s works between the 1960s and 1970s varied greatly, but whatever he depicted—the animal world, scenes of folk celebrations, epic heroes, or heroic past—was distinguished by a sense of scale, rhythm and dynamics. Pesterev preferred animals and multi-figured compositions; he masterfully used the form of the tusk itself as a stand on which rapid movement unfolds.

**The Yakutsk Art School**

The creativity of the postwar generation masters played a decisive role in the further development of the art; they were true folk craftsmen who did not possess a special art education. The most important event for Sakha fine and decorative-applied arts of the post-war period was the opening of the secondary professional Art School in Yakutsk immediately after the end of the war in 1945. The first Yakut professional painters and sculptors graduated from this institution, and in 1960 the sculpture department was transformed into a department of artistic bone carving; the department functions up to this day. During the course of five years of study, as future ivory carvers mastered the basics of academic drawing, painting, and composition, they broadened their general cultural horizons by studying the history of art.

During the first years of the ivory carving department, a mistake was made by teachers, who were all sculptors. They paid greater attention to the principles of professional sculpture—knowledge of anatomy, perspective, accuracy of drawing—to the detriment of decorative qualities and the specifics of folk art. Later, good sculptors came out of the first graduates of the ivory carving department. Then, the famous bone carvers Semion Pesterev and Nikolai Amydayev—folk craftsmen who did not have any higher education—were invited to the department to work as teachers of practical courses. This positively changed the training methods for future professional bone carvers. Through practical classes students began to master the experience of the pre-
vious generation of bone carvers, to create compositions of both the everyday and folkloric genres, to reveal the texture of the material, and to study the ornaments and patterns. At the same time, they studied drawing, modeling, and art history, which were compulsory subjects of the educational program. As a result, a new constellation of ivory carvers emerged who possessed the professional skills of modern artists yet knew the traditions of craftsmanship of the older generation; they pushed the search for new expressive means. This shift signaled a process of professionalization for the folk art of bone carving. Further, in losing its utilitarian function, folk bone carving art passed into the category of decorative and applied art, combining both the ornamental basis and the qualities of a professional sculptural miniature (Ivanova-Unarova 2005: 152). In this regard, the bone carving art of Yakutia occupies a special place among other folk arts.

The origin of such primordially traditional types of folk art as the sewing and ornamentation of traditional ethnic clothing, horse harness decoration, silver jewelry, wood carving (especially making various dishes for kumys making and drinking) has ancient roots. Archaeologists who unearthed Sakha artifacts in the excavations of the fourteenth–sixteenth centuries associate their origins with the culture of the ancient nomads of Western and Central Asia (Bravina and Ivanova-Unarova 2020: 58). Stable national traditions of the Yakut folk culture developed in the seventeenth–nineteenth centuries; as already mentioned, the art of ivory carving began only in the eighteenth century under the influence of the North Russian ivory carving traditions, which absorbed elements from other cultures through processes of acculturation.

**New Innovations**

The works of famous ivory carvers, members of the Russian Union of Artists, like Fedor Markov, Konstantin Mamontov, Georgy Rodionov, Robert Petrov, Roman Pinigin, Vasilii Amydayev, and Vladimir Kapustin are in line with the new trend of development of small decorative sculptural works and define the profile of contemporary Sakha carving. The desire for decorativeness, characteristic of the 1990s, is approached by artists in a multitude of ways. The range of themes is broad, from the traditional animal-focused genre to folklore and lifestyles of the peoples of the North. Mamontov’s compositions are characterized by fluidity of forms and emotions. Rodionov and Petrov first started combining ivory
Ivory carving with elements of silver smithery, such as casting, engraving, gilding, as well as combining carving with leather. The finest openwork carving distinguishes Yegor Savvin’s boxes, which appear as if they are woven with lace. A new artistic development is mammoth ivory jewelry that combines monumental generalization with the specific decorative elegance of ornamental patterns. Yuri Khandy, inspired by Even metal jewelry, designed an ivory necklace (grivna) and earrings with pendants that look like dried fish, a favorite northern delicacy, and engraved and tinted the surface of ivory in the style of the Eskimo carving tradition (Figure 5).

The desire to learn the techniques of Japanese ivory carving art, many years ago expressed by Nikiforov, has been fulfilled by Fedor Markov. Having studied the Japanese miniature carving netsuke, he introduced this technique of decorative sculptural miniature in ivory carving while preserving the integrity of the Sakha style. The miniature, introduced by Markov, quickly became popular with ivory carvers and now is an integral part of the modern Sakha carving. Markov is

Figure 5. Yuri I. Khandy. Necklace (grivna) and earrings “Evenk-Fisherwoman.” Mammoth tusk. Three-dimensional carving, engraving, tinting. 1993. Personal collection.
constantly in search of new forms and new content. He was first to introduce the relief carving and engraving of the entire length of the mammoth tusk. The artist mentioned that he saw this technique during his trip to Uelen, a Chukchi settlement, where the craftsmen engraved the full length of walrus tusk. His works “Country of Olonkho” and “Aigyr Silik,” based on the epic images of olonkho about the creation of the world, were inspired by that technique. Modern artists, which adopting the experience of previous generations, show that they know that tradition is not a static or fixed form of art. Recent artists have been experimenting with materials and studying the mythology, shamanism, and folklore of Sakha culture; they have been introducing new images that stem from traditional Sakha religion, which was revived in the twentieth century by some Sakha thinkers as the concept of aiyy. 

Aiyy refers to the deities who live in the Upper World (in Heaven) and watch over life in the Middle World. The symbol of aiyy is the Tree of Life and Knowledge (the Aal Luuk Mas), which links the three worlds of the universe with its roots, trunk, and crown. We see it connecting the Lower, Middle, and Upper Worlds as depicted by Markov in “Aigyr Silik” (Blessing of the Upper Deities; Figure 6). Recently, many adherents of the Tengrian religion have emerged, which is close to the philosophy of aiyy. One of the active supporters of the revival of Tengrianism was the famous bone carver Robert Petrov, whose works included new symbolic images and elements of runic writing.

Northern Sakha Carving

A separate group of ivory carvers consists of the reindeer herders, hunters, and fishermen who live on the lower reaches of the rivers of the Arctic Ocean and in the basins of the Yana, the Indigirka, and the Kolyma rivers. The historians Gavril Ksenofontov (1992) and Il’ia Gurvich (1977) referred to this group of people as a separate ethnic group, the Northern Sakha, whose culture emerged from centuries-old contacts of the Sakha people with the Evens, Evenks, Yukaghirs, and Russian Old Settlers of the region. The Northern Sakha reindeer herders combine the Arctic lifestyle with Sakha culture. Geographical location and local climate have a great impact not only on the everyday and economic way of life of these northern peoples but are also reflected in the uniqueness of the region’s decorative or applied art and fine arts. The ivory carvers from the Kolyma region, born in the tundra above the Arctic Circle, have absorbed both the Sakha worldview with
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the Yukaghirs’ and Evens’ vision of the world. One such craftsman is eighty-six-year-old Khrisofor Petrov (pseudonym Abytai), who has been carving wood and ivory since he was young. Petrov, who has not been educated, brilliantly conveys the anatomy, habits, and the dynamism of movement of tundra animals: deer, dogs, bears, and polar foxes. Most of his scenes are based on the life of hunters and reindeer

herders. One of his works, “Toward the Sun,” is dedicated to the arrival of the railway to Yakutia (Figure 7). The composition is made in a frieze-like manner, designed for a front view, overloaded with details and symbolic signs. The sun, an allegory of joyful expectations, rises over the country, guarded by epic heroes; the main action takes place in the tundra, where a new thing intrudes into the usual life of fishermen and reindeer breeders—thin lines of electric wires masterfully carved from the mammoth tusk. Despite his arbitrary treatment of the proportions of the figures, the work of the amateur craftsman, who is a skillful master of bone carving, captivates with the sincerity of his feelings and a belief in a happy future.

The works of his son Roman Petrov, a professional bone carver, also depict themes of everyday life. He carves traditional realistic scenes of nature and people’s life in the Kolyma region using deer antler and mammoth tusk. He creates compact, one- or two-figured compositions, trying to convey the spirit and atmosphere of the place where he was born and raised. His composition “Beaters” finely conveys the inner excitement and tension of the deer beaters, the measured running of tired deer in contrast to the swift attacks of furiously barking dogs.

Another northern carver, Mikhail Sleptsov, has been the recipient of many awards from festivals and competitions of ivory and ice carving in Russia and abroad. He masterfully works in the techniques of open-work carving, relief, and three-dimensional carving in various genres of small sculpture (“Master of the Tundra,” “A Man Throwing a Lasso,” “The Northern Dance”), boxes (“The Kolyma Motives”), and chess figures (“Images of the Arctic”). The lyric image of a young bride sitting on a deer attracts a viewer’s attention with its psychological features (Figure 8). Her posture, the movement of her arms, and widely opened eyes express slight embarrassment and hidden joy, and she seems to be looking for the support from a viewer. Her dark, wide coat with a hood in contrast to the girl’s white face and gray color of a deer add a decorative effect to this volumetric composition made of deer antler. Both masters, Roman and Mikhail, use the materials that are abundant and always at hand—deer and elk antlers—while making excellent use of their decorative qualities. Both of them are members of the Russian Union of Artists, an association of professional painters, graphic artists, sculptors, and masters of decorative-applied arts.

Further Innovations

As of 2017, the Republic of Sakha’s branch of the Russian Union of Artists was led by an ivory carving artist for the first time in history: Vasilii Amydaev. Previously, Amydaev, a respected figure among painters, graphic artists, and sculptors, was elected chairman of the Union of Artists of The Republic of Sakha (Yakutia). His current position increased the role of ivory carving in Yakutia and in Russia since the appointment to this post is confirmed by the Russian Union of Artists in Moscow. Vasilii Nikolaevich Amydaev, a graduate of the Department of Sculpture at the Krasnoyarsk Art Institute, followed in the footsteps of his father Nikolai Danilovich Amydaev, who was a People’s Artist of Yakutia. Vasilii explains why he, a professional sculptor, is more attracted to ivory carving: “The art of ivory carving attracts me by the freedom of creativity, the beauty of the material, the ability to express my own thoughts.” The city municipality and local government often commission monumental sculptures to place in the squares and parks of the city, and a sculptor fulfills the demands of the customer; they work closely with the architect and take into account the entire urban environment. Such work requires a certain creative approach, and it is a well-paid position, but Vasilii Nikolayevich prefers to develop his individual creativity. One of the main reasons for his motivation is the desire to continue the art and legacy of his father Nikolai Danilovich. Moreover, in recent years, the Amydaev dynasty of the ivory carvers has expanded to include relatives who engage in ivory carving as well. The youngest of all, Aina, is still a student, but she has already been a participant in several major exhibitions. She has demonstrated that ivory carving is not solely a man’s craft, and a woman can also cope with its demands perfectly. Aina works in the animal genre, traditionally appreciated by ivory carvers, yet she moves from the usual realism of animal representation to fantastical images.

Vasilii Nikolaevich Amydaev, as the patriarch of the Amydaev artistic dynasty, combines active, creative work with the responsibilities of the chairman of the Board of the Union of Artists of The Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) within the complex conditions of the market economy. The fine and decorative-applied arts of the region are experiencing difficulties because of sociocultural and economic changes in society. Commercialization has inevitably affected the creative arts that do not bring a noticeable revenue or financial profit. Mammoth ivory objects are expensive and local people are often not able to support the folk craftsmen. The local market is filled with low-quality and cheap
ceramic, metal and bone products of dubious origin. In these conditions, it is important to preserve and develop folk and professional arts and crafts, such as ivory carving. Over the years, many attempts were made to convert ivory carving to local industry, including artistic crafts. *Sardaana,* a craft factory with an ivory carving workshop, was opened to manufacture objects using original patterns. However, it did not flourish; ivory has not been turned into an industry and remains a unique creative field. Young people have a growing interest in creativity and many strive for professional art education. Bone carvers are taught at the Yakutsk Art College and at the Arctic Institute of Culture and Arts. Interest in ivory carving is supported by annual exhibitions, festivals and competitions held in well-known modern centers of bone carving art. In addition to the popular All-Russian festival “Tale on Mammoth Tusk” held in Yakutsk every five years, exhibitions and competitions are held annually in Salekhard, the historical center of Tobolsk bone carving, where the hosts are the Khanty, Mansi, Nenet, and Nganasan masters. In the recent decade, international exhibitions of ivory carving art have been organized in Magadan, where craftsmen come from Russia and meet with Inuit masters from Alaska and Canada.

In addition, international competitions of ice and snow sculptures in China, Finland, Canada, and Russia are becoming popular, and Sakha carving artists participate every year and often winning awards. Bone carvers from the Republic of Sakha, such as Alexei Andreev, Feodor Markov, Nikolai Ogonerov, and Roman Petrov, have become prize winners are international ice and snow sculptures competitions many times. This does not come as a surprise, as carvers possess universal skills; they can work with ivory, as well as with wood, metal, snow and ice, as all are native elements of their environment. It so happens that in the multiethnic Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), it seems that only Sakha craftsmen are engaged in bone carving. Young Evens, Evenks, and Yukaghirs appear to be more attracted to pursuits in science and literature, and in terms of folk art, many have been focusing on and developing the sewing and decoration of traditional clothing. The art of walrus tusk carving continues to develop in Chukotka and Kamchatka among the Chukchi, Koryak and Itelmen, and the Sakha masters have established creative contacts with them. On the initiative of Vasilii Amydaev, Sakha artists have also gone to exhibit works in Kamchatka as well as in China and Mongolia.
Concluding Thoughts

The main obstacle to ivory carving in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) is the lack of material. In recent decades, commercial interest in mammoth tusk has increased due to the ban on the extraction and supply of modern elephant ivory to the world market. After the sale of ivory was banned in accordance with the UN Convention on International Trade in Rare Species of Wild Animals and Plants (CITES) adopted in 1975, the hunt for mammoth tusk intensified. Mammoth tusks have become the subject of trade, often illegal, as laws have not yet been settled. According to many inhabitants of the Arctic region, the extraction and sale of mammoth tusk allowed many representatives of the indigenous peoples of the North to survive in the 1990s, a decade of market reforms. However, the uncontrolled export of mammoth tusks caused concern among the government of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia). In connection with the ban on elephant ivory on the world market, the price of the mammoth tusk has also risen. According to expert estimates, more than 80 percent of the resources of mammoth tusks in Russia are concentrated in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), and the potential of the mammoth tusk resources in Yakutia is estimated at about 500,000 tons. A new concept has been proposed for the introduction of state ecological supervision over the collecting of paleontological remains of mammoth fauna so as to regulate the export of mammoth tusks and their fragments and to simplify the rules and order of the internal market of mammoth bone for the purpose of the carving development. The concept was approved by order of the head of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), A. S. Nikolaev, dated August 13, 2018.

In summary, we would like to note that Sakha ivory carving has gone through three major stages in its history and the stylistic direction of its development. Having emerged in the eighteenth century, during the entire eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it remained a folk art with its inherent specific features, during which the influence of North Russian carving was noticeable. During this period, the utilitarian function prevailed: masters produced some luxury goods and beautiful things for everyday use. During the 1940s–1960s the creativity of unknown folk craftsmen was replaced by the art of professional bone carvers, who worked according to the laws of small sculptural models. Next, during the 1970s–1980s, a modern school of Sakha bone carving art was formed. At the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the art of Sakha bone carvers acquired features that brought it closer
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to decorative-applied art. At this time the original creative and easily recognized “handwriting” of an author plays a decisive role.

The formation, development, and change of artistic styles in Sakha ivory and bone carving went along with the changes in society—through renovations and inevitable losses. Unlike other traditional Sakha crafts, such as woodcarving, sewing, blacksmithing and jewelry, the carving of tusk and bone originated and developed on the basis and layers of different cultural traditions, possessing a mobile and changeable character. As time has shown, the artists introduced elements from other cultures almost unnoticeably, thereby preserving the distinctive stylistics of the Sakha approach. Through the process of cultural contact, the Sakha bone carving art was enriched with new techniques, while preserving its own features and its ethnocultural identity.

Folk art does not disappear but because of its flexibility and internal integrity, it is constantly evolving in search of self-preservation and through its adaptation to the new sociocultural conditions of life. Nowadays, ivory and bone carving are again at the center of public attention. The creativity of modern bone carvers in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) testifies to the fact that this cultural tradition, accumulated over four centuries, is enriched with new content; it is always dynamic and part of an organic relationship of the old and the new. The search for new forms, new material, and new ways of processing in accordance with the spirit of the times remains within a framework of centuries-old traditions. Acculturation is a natural process of changing material and spiritual culture, which occurs during direct contact between different peoples; it enriches and stimulates the further development of the culture of an ethnic group and the emergence of new facets in the depths of age-old traditions.

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Notes

1. Pud, an old Russian measure of weight, approximately 36 pounds or 16 kilograms.
2. Kumys is a traditional Sakha drink made of mare’s milk.
3. Meginskii ulus, now called Megino-Kangalasskii ulus has its center in the village of Maia and is located on the right bank of the Lena River opposite the city of Yakutsk. The full list of ivory carvers known at the beginning of the nineteenth century was recorded by V. Ivanov (1979: 106–108).
4. Olonkho is the most ancient heroic epos of the Sakha people; it consists of legends about the creation of the three (Upper, Middle, and Lower) worlds of the universe and details the struggle of epic heroes who defend people from the monsters of the Lower World. Olonkho was traditionally performed by an olonkhosut (storyteller) orally with prose and songs. There are over 300 different olonkho. By the decision of UNESCO, olonkho is classified as a masterpiece of the immaterial oral heritage of mankind.
5. Tengrianism refers to the ancient religious system of Turkic-speaking peoples, which spread prior to Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. It was based on the cult of Heaven, belief in the Creator, and worship of the spirits of nature. Tengri in ancient Turkic means sky, the highest god. In Sakha, the word “God” is Tangara, and the highest deity of the Upper World is Aiyy-Tangara.
6. CITES, also known as Washington Convention, is a multilateral treaty to protect endangered plants and animals. The convention was opened for signing in 1973 and CITES entered into force on July 1, 1975.

References


