



Beauty in Form and Function: The Duodji of Jon Tomas Utsi

February 15—May 26, 2024

Kin museum för samtidskonst—dáládáidaga dávvirvuorká
nykaijantaitemyseymmi—Museum of Contemporary Art

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In the exhibition *Beauty in Form and Function: The Duodji of Jon Tomas Utsi*, Porjus-based Sámi crafter Jon Tomas Utsi will show about fifty of his works made over the course of the last thirty years. He is a duojár, a Sámi craftsman working with hard materials, and his repertoire includes niibbit (knives), gárit (bowls), skáhput (boxes), giissát (chests), nállogoadit (needle cases), and sálkorat (salt bottles). These objects all have their origins in the Sámi lifestyle in Sápmi, in the northern regions of Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Russia. As this way of life has often involved relocation from one place to another, the designs of the objects tend to favor a sparing economy of weight and volume. This mode of “compact living” was developed by and for a group who subsisted off the land, and for whom mobility was always a vital aspect of their lifestyle. A duojár was and is still familiar with the entire lifecycle of an object, from the resourcing of materials and production of the item to the actual use of the end product.

Jon Tomas Utsi combines reindeer herding with duodji, just as his father and grandfather did before him. He has been a practitioner of Sámi crafts since the age of ten or so. During certain times of the year, he works on crafts for weeks on end, and during other times, he needs to care for his reindeer. Along with the Sámi languages, duodji serves to strengthen the bonds between the generations, and thus holds an important place in Sámi culture. The design of these objects is informed by a need for lightweight mobility and easy storage and stowing, both during relocations and within the functional layouts of the homes. Rounded bottoms, for example, are more useful than flat ones when gárri are to be used on floors made from birch branches and reindeer hides.

A náhppi is a wooden bowl with handles, which is traditionally used when milking reindeer. Since reindeer cows don't tend to stand completely still when milked, the rim of the náhppi is turned inwards, to keep the milk from spilling. The small knives, or niibbit, with handles made from the roots of the curly birch tree, are small enough to fit inside your hand, and are used exclusively for earmarking reindeer calves. Earmarks are used to tell who an animal belongs to. Each reindeer herder has their own mark, which is registered with Sámediggi, the Sámi Parliament. Gathering materials for these handles is an important part of the work, as it is for all the other objects. He shows his works during the Jokkmokk market, and in the combined shop and gallery at the Sámi Duodji Association. There are many avid collectors of his works.

One large sálkor is made from a piece of wood that his grandfather once picked up in the forest, and which his uncle discovered in the old family home many years later. The best antlers for crafting are shed antlers, which people forage for in their lands. A truly skilled duojár can “read” the antlers and choose the best possible part of the finest antler to use for their duodji.

One of Jon Tomas Utsi's trademarks as a crafter is the excellent carvings of reindeer he adds to his antler objects. These objects have been documented in both written and illustrated works dating back to the 1500s, and their shapes remain consistent to this day. However, that's not to suggest that a duojár such as Jon Tomas Utsi won't add their own personal flair to the things they make. The designs are works in progress, and their specific shapes and lines are always being innovated. Any aspect is subject to change, as long as the change is made in line with tradition, with the typical. Techniques, materials, working methods, and ornamentation combine to give each piece a specific, local character.

As he sees it, the North Sámi design and decoration traditions live on. His family brought these with them when they, like many other Sámi from Gárasávvon (in Swedish the Karesuando region) were forcibly relocated to the South, to Lule Sámi territories. The northern designs characteristically include heart and star shapes, and an interplay between blank and decorated surfaces. The pattern design is less rigid than in the South Sámi tradition, where decoration tends to cover whole surfaces and involve strictly regulated combinations of soft curves and straight lines. From these details, researchers have traced influences originating from the East, suggesting that their origins lie in Karelia and Russia.

Despite colonization, duodji has done more than merely live on; to this day, it remains an invaluable bearer of culture and identity. The impact of the individual pieces resides at least in part in their practical natures. These are objects that are used on a daily basis, and this repetitive aspect is combined with a unique, contemporary vision. Besides duodji, there is also the concept of dáidda, an expression coined in the 1970s to refer to art in the more contemporary sense. Dáidda is influenced by Western conceptions of art and tends to lack practical utility.

Jon Tomas Utsi learned to make most of these objects from his father, and this is how the knowledge has always been handed down from one generation to the next. Apart from smaller objects, his grandfather made skis, sleds, boats, and peat huts, all skills that were essential aspects of birget, or getting by. He also studied duodji within the modern education system, at Sámiij áhpádušguovdásj, the Sámi education centre in Jáhkámáhke, which is where he eventually became a teacher himself. While the design of his knives is rooted in a millennia-old culture that is still standing strong, they also serve a practical, everyday purpose. There is something magical about that.

The exhibition is part of the museum's multi-year inquiry *Hand, Heart and Brain*, which explores how artists today embrace older crafts techniques and rework them for current and future usage.

Maria Lind

Self-presentation

Jon Tomas Utsi, born 1974 in Karesuando and now based in Porjus is a practicing duojár, a Sámi crafts person, a position he combines with reindeer herding. Utsi was primarily educated by his father but also in the Sámiij áhpádušguovdásj, the Sámi education center in Jokkmokk, a school where he's also previously taught. His works are represented at Ájtte, which is the principal museum of Sámi culture, special museum for the mountain region, information center for mountain tourism as well as Sámiid Vuorká-Dávvirat. One of the most important exhibition occasions is the annual Jokkmokk market. In 2005 he was the inaugural recipient of the Asa Kitok grant and in 2014 he received the traditional duodji in Sápmi awards. He is the 2023 recipient of Konstnärsmåndens Stora stipendium.

Konstfest at Kin Museum of Contemporary Art, February 15—18, 2024

Thursday, February 15

16:00 Opening in the lobby: *The Observatory: Art and Life in the Critical Zone, Beautiful and Functional: The Duodji of Jon Tomas Utsi, Textile Magic with Doris Wiklund, Kristina Pashkova, Maja Fredin, and Matilda Kentta; the collection*

- Maria Lind, director Kin Museum of Contemporary Art
- *Markerna*, work by Carola Grahn and Nils-Johan Labba
- Joanna Warsza, program director Curatorlab, Konstfack
- Artist Luca Frei presents *Mobile Lobby*, the museum's new reception desk
- Drinks and snacks

The following artists will be present: Alexander Ravskyj, Alexandra Ravskaya, Anastasia Kizilova, Bernd Krauss, Carin Ellberg, Fredrik Prost, Ilmira Bolotyan, Inga-Wiktoria Påve, Ingela Ihrman, Jon Tomas Utsi, Katarina Pirak Sikku, Kirill Agafonov Kultivator, Luca Frei, Nina Svensson, Kristina Pashkova, Maja Fredin, and Matilda Kenttä and Olga Sjirokostup.

16:30 Ingela Ihrman performance “Oilbird with Nestling”

17:00 Visit to the exhibitions

Friday, February 16

16:00-16:45 Duodji from antlers to woodwork—a conversation with duojár Jon Tomas Utsi and Liselotte Winka, Curatorlab, floor 3

Jon Tomas Utsi started to do handicraft when he was ten years old and has carried on ever since. Today, he partly makes a living as a duojár or Sámi craftsman and he is also educated as a teacher in wood and metalwork. The Utsi family was formerly dislocated from Karesuando and at present he lives in Porjus, as a reindeer herder. Utsi's craft objects include anything from knives, drinking vessels, milk pails (náhppi) and wood boxes. He finds the material in nature, mostly from birch trees and fallen off reindeer antlers. The form often decides the function of the object. Utsi's craft is a way of keeping the Sámi culture alive.

Colophon

Kin Museum of Contemporary Art
 Stadshuset Kristallen
 Stadshustorget 1
 98130 Kiruna

Team

Emma Pettersson Juntti, production, coordination, mediation
 Hampus Bergander, curator
 Ilnur Mustafin, technician
 Judith Schwarzbart, production
 Maija Melchakova, administration
 Maria Lind, director
 Märta Öringe, collection and mediation
 Paulina Sokolow, communication
 Hosts: Alex Heikkinen, Ida-Maria Svonni, Lloyd Jarlemyr,
 Milly Sundgren and Tova Söderberg
 Graphic design: Johanna Lewengard and Benedetta Crippa

The visual language of Kin is developed by artists Inga-Wiktoria Påve och Fredrik Prost in collaboration with designers Johanna Lewengard and Benedetta Crippa.

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Kin Museum of Contemporary Art is the regional art museum of Norrbotten, founded in 2018 by the region and the municipality of Kiruna.

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