

11 ANATOL DONKAN: A NANAI ARTIST LIVING THROUGH PERESTROIKA

Erich Kasten

Introduction

Using the example of a Nanai artist Anatol Donkan from the Amur River region, this study demonstrates the lasting impact of new ideas and the opening toward the West during the period of *perestroika* on his creative development and subsequent life trajectory. During his art studies in Khabarovsk, Donkan developed a particular interest in the Nanai worldview and ritual practices, as expressed in their carved wooden figures. He soon recognized the importance of preserving and further developing this valuable body of Indigenous knowledge.

In our conversation, he was particularly impressed by the compelling performances of Mikhail Gorbachev and his wife Raisa Gorbacheva, and he consequently adopted their ideas and translated their aims into his own concrete initiatives. To this end, he established workshops and museums, first in Russia and later in Germany. Alongside his own artistic work, his efforts were also directed toward researching and revitalizing lost Indigenous knowledge of the Nanai, thereby contributing to the preservation of significant elements of their cultural heritage.

Childhood and youth

Anatol (Anatolii Pavlovich) Donkan was born in 1955 in the village of Tunguska, located on a tributary of the Amur River, and was raised in various children's homes in the nearest larger city, Komsomolsk-on-Amur. As part of state programs at the time, residents were forcibly resettled in larger settlements and were compelled to leave their villages against their will. "They were told, 'if you stay, you will no longer receive any support.'"

Anatol was separated from his parents in early childhood and placed in an infant care institution (*dom mladentsa*). He has no recollection of this period; later, others told him that the children had simply been taken away by the police. These experiences may, however, have found expression in his later dreams, in which an elderly woman (his grandmother?) bent over him and said: "The police will come to take you now, and you will have to go to a children's home." Since Anatol has no recollection of that period, he can only assume that his parents may have resisted the resettlement. This could therefore be interpreted as a form of punishment, particularly given that the removal of children was not standard practice in such resettlement processes.

He was later transferred to another institution, where adolescents from other socially stigmatized groups (including, among others, Jews) were also brought together for the purposes of “re-education.”¹

On Sundays, the children were permitted to travel by bus to visit relatives, provided they still knew of any and that they lived nearby. Anatol, however, would always go to the large market in Komsomolsk-on-Amur, where Nanai women sold fish, as he was fascinated by their distinctly different clothing. From his name, they recognized that he was one of their own and explained to him the various gathered plants they were selling, such as wild garlic (*cheremsha*).

He was particularly captivated by the large fishes, which he was allowed to touch and examine more closely. Later, at the age of twelve, he was permitted to travel to the Amur River during the summer, where Nanai fishermen showed him how to handle fishing lines and hooks. One woman told him, “Tolia, be careful,” as the fish were so large that their tails protruded from the sacks. People would say, “He is a born fisherman! Who else would go out in such weather?” Such praise meant a lot to him while he was growing up in institutional care.

His interest in fishing was thus awakened, and after spending time in various orphanages, Anatol enrolled at the Far Eastern Nautical School (*Dal'nevostochnoe morekhotnoe uchilishche*) in Vladivostok, where he specialized in fisheries. Initially, however, it was not easy for him to secure employment in the state fishing fleet. As he recalled: “My documents stated that I was born a Nanai. Later, when I applied for a

seaman's book, I was told: ‘We will not issue one to you, because you are the first Nanai, and moreover you come from a state care institution. You have no connection to a homeland.’ But what homeland did they have in mind?” This statement must have deeply affected Anatol and brought his already perceived fractured identity into sharp relief – an identity which he would later pursue more closely.



Fig. 1 Anatol Donkan, a cadet at the Far Eastern Nautical School, aged nineteen or twenty. Vladivostok 1974/1975. Photo: personal archive Anatol Donkan.

1 Comparable practices of forced adoption and re-education were also implemented in the GDR and are again being observed in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine.

By the age of twenty he was already working as a helmsman on fishing vessels, which allowed him to travel widely, as fishing operations took place in the waters around Kamchatka and even off the Pacific coast of Canada. On one occasion, during a storm, his boat was forced to anchor in a sheltered bay in the Queen Charlotte Islands (now Haida Gwaii), where he encountered foreigners for the first time when the coast guard approached in their speedboats. As he recalled: “They smiled at us, and we could not communicate with one another, so we showed what we had with us. In the end, we exchanged Russian cigarettes (*papirosy*) for magazines featuring provocative images of women (*Playboy*).”

Later, Anatol grew increasingly critical of the mismanagement in the fishing industry. Storage facilities were often already full when they landed their catch, forcing them to discard the fish: “I loved my work, but I hated this system.” He eventually left the fishing fleet and sought other employment on land.

At the time, the fishing company was looking for a graphic designer and recalled that Anatol could draw. When he was in the eighth grade, a teacher had once come into the classroom asking whether anyone could paint, as the regular poster artist was unavailable. The response was unanimous: “Yes – Donkan!” Thus, he was given the task of transferring film motifs onto large canvases. Before taking on the work, however, he asked whether he might be allowed to watch the films for free of charge – permission that was granted, and he was even able to bring along friends from residential care home. From that time on, he was already regarded at school as an “artist,” as he earned most of his pocket money from the eighth grade onward by painting cinema posters.

After leaving the fishing industry, Anatol worked as a decorative painter. Yet he continually recalled things he had seen in his childhood: “All the coats and garments the women wore at the market, the vessels, the dishes, and the tools they made. All these things were somehow different – they featured carved patterns or distinctive forms. I simply could not let go of it.”

Encountering new ideas during the *perestroika* era

Then came the period when Anatol had to paint posters in the factory featuring the new members of the Politburo, and suddenly a new figure appeared – Mikhail Gorbachev. He was told: “You have to paint him; in every hall, the old posters must be covered with those of Gorbachev!” Shortly thereafter, words like *perestroika* and *glasnost* were heard everywhere, though no one really understood what they meant at first. People joked: “Everything has to be rebuilt!” They said, “Now there is *perestroika* and *glasnost* – now we can do anything.” But no one truly knew what this “anything” entailed. The first thought that came to Anatol was that perhaps he should study art, as he had always had a love for drawing and color.

The art institute in Khabarovsk, however, was initially unwilling to admit him without prior attendance at an art school. Consequently, he enrolled in preparatory

courses, which he had to pay for himself, and successfully passed the entrance examination. By the sixth semester, students were expected to conceive a diploma project, usually depicting a worker – male or female – or a landscape: that is, something in the classical style. But during this time, something unexpected occurred. Tourists arrived, eager to see the clothing, jewelry, and everyday objects of the Nanai. In the display cases, they also saw figurines, and Anatol was told that they came from the Nanai. Later, he traveled along the Amur River with his paintbox, creating landscapes and portraits, and he told the people he met that he intended to make his diploma project about the people of the Amur – the Nanai.

When he was once in the village of Kondon, people showed him figurines and said, “This is Grandmother, and this is Grandfather.” They did not initially explain much, only that one was supposed to bow before them and offer them vodka, and Anatol assumed these were rituals. He realized that the people he was speaking with were different from those he had known elsewhere, and his curiosity was sparked.



Fig. 2 Historical figurines from the Donkan Collection. Viechtach, 2020. Photo: Susanne Schmolke.

He then proposed to his professors that he would base his diploma project on cult figurines – as they were called at the time. However, they told him that this was not a proper topic for a diploma, since it was not considered “art.” Anatol replied that, for him, it was art, and jokingly asked whether he should call Gorbachev, since now, after all, anything was allowed. In the end, he was permitted to pursue this topic.

Thereupon, Anatol traveled to the villages with his toolkit and paintbox and began carving, reproducing the figurines he had previously observed. People came and asked what he was doing, and he encouraged them to carve as well. Some joined in, and even those standing by began to explain that the figures represented certain

spirits (*seven*), each with a particular significance, thereby bringing the figurines to life for everyone.

Anatol was fascinated and wanted to learn more, but many replied that there was little knowledge left about certain things and that, in fact, one was not supposed to speak about them. However, villagers directed him to a particular expert on the tradition: “In Vladivostok, where you live, there is a man named Nikolai Batunovich Kile. He writes small textbooks on the language and culture of the Nanai. You should meet him – perhaps he can tell you more about these figurines.”

Anatol recalled that the Institute of History, where Kile worked, was actually an institution with restricted access, and one could not simply visit the professors at will. However, when Kile heard the family name Donkan, he immediately recognized that Anatol came from a prominent Nanai lineage and began speaking with him openly right away.

Anatol explained his intention to write his diploma project on shamanic cult figurines, as they clearly possessed a great deal of power and presence that he wished to convey in his work. Kile responded that he was the first person he had met who showed interest in them, and said: “Before you make such inquiries, you must first study the literature – the reports from ethnographic expeditions.” Anatol then began reading extensively, which enabled him to ask the community elders more focused questions. After some time, he returned to Kile, who said: “Good, now you may ask me.”

While I carved my figurines, he watched me and spoke of his own childhood. He recalled how and on what occasions his relatives had once made such figures, Donkan related of Kile’s reminiscences as they drank tea together. Anatol – who had grown



Fig. 4 Family cradle of the Kile family, used by several generations and presented as a special gift to A. Donkan. Donkan Collection. Viechtach 2024. Photo. Andrea Altmann.

Fig. 3 A. Donkan and N.B. Kile. Abashiri. From the catalogue: The 10th Special Exhibition: The Nanai People of the Great Amur River – Exhibition of Materials from the Amur Museum of Ethnic Art. Hokkaido Museum of Northern Peoples, 1995.



up in a children's home without parents – learned much about his Donkan family lineage. Over time, this led to a deep friendship between them. For Anatol and his later work, it was a significant encounter, one he would recall again and again.

Finally, in 1992, Anatol successfully completed his diploma project at the university in Khabarovsk, entitled “Cult Figures of the Shamans on the Amur.” However, the professors told him that, although his work was excellent, it would be the last diploma project of its kind at their institute. They remarked that the pieces looked beautiful, but that they did not really understand them.

This could have marked the end of Anatol's ambitions for a career as an artist. However, these were times of widespread upheaval, bringing new opportunities – including contacts and influences from outside that had previously been scarcely possible.

At that time, an increasing number of visitors from abroad were coming to the Amur region, many of whom were interested in the culture of the local Indigenous population. Anatol happened to meet the artist Mareile Onodera, who was originally from Germany but was now living in Japan. She was impressed by Anatol's figures, though she was actually more interested in the intricately embroidered patterns on Nanai garments. Both wanted to learn more about the meanings of the ornaments and figures, so they repeatedly traveled along the Amur River and its tributaries, working with the few remaining Indigenous knowledge holders to uncover the worldview and rituals of the Nanai that were embodied in these objects.

Eventually, Mareile invited Anatol to Japan to participate in an exhibition at the Aoki Contemporary Art Gallery in Tokyo. He was told that it usually took ten years to secure an exhibition there. More or less incidentally, Anatol showed the gallery owner photos of his diploma project – the owner immediately responded: “I want

your exhibition in five to six months.” Anatol explained that he would need carving tools and wood, to which the gallery owner replied, “You have a 100-day visa. Go to a Japanese village; you'll find everything there!”

So Anatol traveled with Mareile to a village, where she translated and explained his plans to the locals. An enthusiastic Japanese carpenter gifted him two large black boxes filled with old handmade tools – an incredible gift for Anatol, who immediately began his work after finding suitable logs.

When his exhibition opened, the gallery owner took him aside and said, “You know, the exhibition hasn't officially



Fig. 5 A. Donkan holding figurines from his exhibition in downtown Tokyo, 1994. Photo: Hidemi Seto.

opened yet, but it's already sold out. Two art collectors have divided it between them." For Anatol, this marked his emotional and artistic breakthrough – his work, which had until then been little appreciated and barely understood in Russia, suddenly received prominent international recognition.

Having established his reputation through this work, Anatol increasingly immersed himself in the meaning of the figures he was carving. He came to understand the immense value of this Indigenous knowledge, which was gradually at risk of being lost, and felt it was his responsibility to preserve it. He recalled the many tourists who were now traveling through the Amur region and buying old carved figures from the local population – who were at that time suffering from severe economic hardship, and so sold these figures at bargain prices as souvenirs. Many of these items could be parted with easily, since their original significance had been forgotten during the Soviet era.

Anatol told the villagers, "Do not sell these objects, so that they are not lost forever." To avoid this fate, he began to assemble a collection, aiming to keep many of these items nearby until the Nanai might one day ask, "Where are the things our grandparents made?" To this end, he purchased the objects from the locals with the money he had earned in Japan, in "hard Japanese currency," which was highly valued at the time.

The founding of the Amur Ethnic Art Museum

During the *perestroika* period, it became possible in many areas to translate new ideas – often through contacts with the West – into independent initiatives. Anatol thus resolved to establish a small museum upon his return to Vladivostok, using the money he had unexpectedly earned in Japan, in order to preserve the old figures, he had collected. In 1994, Anatol founded the Amur Ethnic Art Museum in Vladivostok, setting it up in an old attic that he had renovated himself, starting with repairs to its leaky roof. However, he realized that this alone would not be enough to safeguard the Indigenous knowledge associated with them, and he began considering future courses and workshops for younger Nanai.

Alongside his interest in the carved figures, Anatol had been closely connected to fish since his youth and early professional work, and he recalled a key experience from when he once stayed in the village of Kondon in the old, dilapidated house of a deceased shaman. There he discovered a piece of material, almost like paper, and after washing it in the river, he realized it was fish skin. He dried the skin and kneaded it to make it soft and pliable, becoming fascinated by what could be created with it. He understood that fish leather was a material that was both practical and beautiful, and that this material was no longer produced. It became clear to him that the valuable knowledge of processing fish skins into leather, passed down over countless Nanai generations, had largely been lost by the 1960s. Anatol then studied the techniques –



Fig. 6 A. Donkan studying Indigenous techniques in Kondon, 1992. Photo: personal archive Anatol Donkan.

particularly tanning methods that keep dried fish skins elastic and prevent them from breaking when re-exposed to moisture – drawing from older written records and fragmentary guidance from the last remaining experts in the tradition. After mastering these techniques, Anatol devoted himself not only to his artistic work but also to the revival of this once traditionally important Nanai craft. Although older women still kneaded dried fish skins into fine, parchment-like material that could be cut and sewn, it could no longer be used as clothing due to its limited durability. When museums in major Soviet cities occasionally commissioned garments made from fish skin, they did not care whether the material could withstand damp weather in everyday use – for display in museum cases, untreated dried fish skin was sufficient, even if it ultimately became parchment-like and brittle.

But Anatol took such a keen interest in tanning, and these women eventually encouraged him to investigate the traditional tanning processes in order to restore fish leather for practical use. Through conversations with the Nanai living along the rivers, he became aware of the extensive utilization and sustainability with which they had once managed their resources – an approach starkly different from what he had witnessed in the Russian fishing industry (see above). The Nanai relied primarily on fishing, and every part of the fish was used. This included the abundant fish skins, which, when expertly and laboriously processed, not only yielded practical, water-proof materials but also aligned with Indigenous beliefs that it was a sacrilege to leave any part of what nature had provided unused.²

The museum that Anatol founded in the center of Vladivostok included space for a small workshop dedicated to processing fish skins, and its location was ideal due to its proximity to the fishing harbor. When he asked what he would have to pay for these by-products of commercial fishing, he was told to simply take them, as long as he did not disrupt the workflow. So, he would go there early in the morning, remove the fish

2 For Indigenous fish-skin processing knowledge with regard to modern sustainable uses in the fashion sector, see Palomino 2026.



Fig. 7 Garments made from fishskin in the attic of the studio in Vladivostok, 1993/1994.
Photo: personal archive Anatol Donkan.

skins, and tuck two or three into his backpack until it was full, returning happily to his museum with them. There, he and his assistants would tan and process the skins. It was hard, grueling work; their hands were constantly calloused and often bloodied.

Anatol was able to engage many young people in his project, and increasingly elaborate items such as coats, mats, and collages were produced. Anatol and his assistants were invited to institutes to demonstrate their work, and a fish-leather coat was even exhibited in Paris, receiving a special award. The sale of these artworks, including to foreigners, contributed to the livelihoods of the participants, which was especially welcome during the economically difficult times of that period.

The darker side of *perestroika*, however, was that others often tried to appropriate successful and promising initiatives for themselves. Certain local politicians and officials expected “support” from him.³ Anatol told them to leave him alone. They left their cards, saying, “If you have any problems, call us.” Soon after, he found his car with its tires removed, and shortly thereafter, the entire vehicle was stolen. Then fire-fighters came, claiming that the rooms were unsafe to occupy because of faulty wiring and an unstable structure. And there were repeated visits from the security services (FSB, formerly KGB), questioning Anatol about his contacts with foreigners.

3 I experienced similar forms of state-mafia collusion in St. Petersburg during the early 1990s, when former KGB officers were gaining control over local politics.

Turning away from Russia and further developing his arts and crafts in the West

The situation in Vladivostok had become increasingly precarious for Anatol, so he gratefully accepted an invitation from the Hokkaido Museum for Northern Peoples in Abashiri to exhibit his collection and demonstrate his craft and artistic work (see caption Photo 3). While there, he also created a seven-meter-long dugout canoe made from poplar wood, with a fish-skin sail, as had been done traditionally but had long fallen out of practice. Many Japanese artists visited and gained significant inspiration from his work.



Fig. 8 Discussion of craft techniques and shamans on Sakhalin with Aikio Kitagawa, an Uilta woman. Abashiri, 1994. Photo: Bunkichi Aoyagi.

considered as archaeological artifacts to Russia, while retaining the remainder of the wooden figures abroad.

At that time, Mareile, with whom Anatol was now living, had to travel to Vienna for family reasons, and he accompanied her. There, he met the director of what is now the Weltmuseum, who was impressed by Anatol's expertise when he opened old crates of Nanai objects in the storage rooms – items that apparently had not been closely examined since the Tsarist era, and which could be little understood without specialized knowledge. Anatol was thrilled to see such ancestral objects for the first time, and he was able to curate a small exhibition of his own pieces alongside the existing collection.

The museum director advised him to remain in Austria and to continue pursuing his initiatives to preserve the knowledge of fish-skin processing. Although no scholarship could be offered, he was supported in establishing the nonprofit association for the revival of Indigenous Northern Peoples' art. Eventually, an entrepreneur from Lower Bavaria took an interest in Anatol's work and invited him to set up a small fish-skin workshop there. While Anatol had the technical expertise, the entrepreneurial side was new to him; however, his earlier experience as a helmsman had taught him how to organize a crew. He procured all the necessary machinery, and eventually a team of twenty people worked in the workshop.

When the exhibition ended, Anatol faced the question of whether he should return to Russia. His recent experiences had made him hesitant, and many advised against it due to the increasingly unpredictable political situation in the country. He also saw no secure future in Russia for the carefully assembled collection he had built. Anatol reached an agreement with the Russian authorities to return older objects,

The business flourished, but the workload became overwhelming for Anatol, and eventually he wished to focus more on Indigenous crafts techniques and the cultural significance of the motifs for his own artistic work. In 2007, he founded the Fish Leather Museum (Fischledermuseum e.V.) in Viechtach in the Bavarian Forest, where he continues to work in his studio to this day.

“What did *perestroika* actually mean for me?”

When I asked Anatol directly about his experiences during the *perestroika* period in Russia during a visit in spring 2026, he reflected as follows:

“Of course, everyone laughed about it back then, everywhere – I remember that very well. But the thing is: people in the Soviet Union at the time, like me in the children’s home or at school, were always under a certain pressure, because we were raised in fear of the future. The teachers would always say: ‘Out there are the imperialists, and there will be another war, even though we have just survived one.’ And all the stories in literature and films constantly generated a sense of fear; you were not allowed to do this or that, because there might be spies watching. It was a subtle fear, barely noticeable, but it permeated daily life. People were cautious and held back. You had to be careful not to say the wrong thing, and there wasn’t much to laugh about. Of course, propagandists tried to make us laugh through films. But if you watch those films today – they aren’t funny at all.”

Anatol recalls how discussions about *perestroika* began, though political groups interpreted the reforms in very different ways. Some believed that suddenly, everything was now allowed. A key moment for Anatol came when he saw a film report showing Mikhail Gorbachev and his wife Raisa in a textile factory, standing among many female workers and appearing quite small in the crowd. The women asked him, “Mikhail Sergeievich, what should we do now? We have no work, wages are low. How are we supposed to live?” Gorbachev replied, “Comrades, I think we should work,” which his wife confirmed.

Anatol felt he understood the message: that one now had to take action oneself and take one’s life into one’s own hands, without waiting for orders from above. “You have to find your place in society first and then decide what to do – and then do it. That was an important experience for me. I had always been afraid, but at the same time I felt internally strong – now I could suddenly breathe deeply with incredible ease, as if surfacing from underwater.”

Since then, the words *glasnost* and *perestroika* no longer seemed ridiculous to Anatol, and he stopped debating them with others. For him, it was clear: you had to take action. While traveling along the Amur River, he noticed that people had grown more relaxed and even joked about the failing *kolkhoz*. He inquired among the Nanai whether there were still women who used to create the intricate patterns, and they replied that they had no scissors, no glue, and not even the original designs, since they had been forced to work in the *kolkhoz*.

So Anatol went to Vladivostok and purchased silk threads, scissors, and needles on the black market at the time. When he returned to the women, they said, “*perestroika* is all well and good, but we’ll soon starve. We have no money to pay for anything, and everything is recorded in a debt book.” Anatol then showed them what he had brought. When he presented the patterns, they said these were not their designs – and their pride was awakened. Anatol suggested that they create their own patterns and try to sell them. By the very next day, the first women arrived with their own embroidered works.

Anatol asked why some of the patterns were not perfectly straight, and the women explained that the ethnographers who had visited before always said, “You should stitch exactly as your grandmothers did, because that is what tradition requires.” Anatol replied, “You are young – create beautiful patterns based on your own heritage, patterns that you also like!” Here, his artistic conviction was already evident: in craft, one should make room for personal ideas in order to keep the skills and knowledge of ancestors alive and evolving, rather than merely reproducing old clichés. The young women were eager to do well, and they even tried to outdo one another.

Anatol agreed with them that he would pay for each piece that he could sell at exhibitions in the city. When he returned with the money, the women went into the shop and said, “We earned this ourselves – show me your debt book and cross me off!” A few men standing nearby remarked, “Now you’re probably going to buy vodka with the rest of the money?” But the women replied, “No, we’ll buy more materials and keep stitching!” And they did – stitching a great deal during that time.

Then ethnographers from St. Petersburg arrived and wanted to organize an exhibition of the embroidery at the museum. The women asked what they would be paid, but the ethnographers replied, “Why pay? An exhibition in a museum brings you fame,” thereby echoing the old Soviet narrative. Even today, this attitude often lingers in negotiations with artists.

Anatol returned to the point that many people had interpreted the new opportunities differently and, naturally, had mostly used them for their own benefit. “But now, when the word *perestroika* comes up, people say, ‘Gorbachev betrayed us – he just sold our beloved Soviet Union.’” Of course, Anatol considers this completely wrong. For him, Gorbachev has remained throughout his life the only political figure about whom he can say, “My God, what a blessing it was to witness this at all! Because soon afterward, people were once again ruled by fear. New leaders came to power who began to spread fear. Again, people telling us we were doing everything wrong, dictating the way forward. And this continues to this day. But back then, I was fortunate to experience this unique moment” – a moment that, without doubt, has had a lasting impact on Anatol’s life.

Anatol's lasting attachment with the Nanai and efforts to preserve their Indigenous knowledge

Even after leaving Russia, Anatol has always felt a deep bond to his homeland and a sense of responsibility for preserving the cultural heritage of the Nanai. Opportunities for direct exchange and personal encounters, however, remain limited due to the political situation. He was therefore pleased to take the opportunity to make his extensively annotated collection freely accessible online in Russian via the *Digital Museum of the North*.⁴ This platform is particularly popular among young users in Indigenous communities across Russia. The corresponding catalog (Kasten 2025) is also available in Russian for open access.⁵

Since Anatol was currently particularly focused on newly acquired garments from the Manchuria and Amur regions and the embroidered ornaments they featured, during one of my recent visits I showed him the relatively little-known work by Berthold Laufer (1902), *The Decorative Art of the Amur Tribes*.⁶ Anatol was fascinated by the detailed information contained in the book, much of which had already fallen into oblivion by the time he lived there. As the book has not yet been published in



Fig. 9 Anatol Donkan (left) in his studio in Vichach in conversation with Erich Kasten, 2024. Photo: Andrea Altmann.

4 <https://mu-north.org>

5 <https://dh-north.org/publikationen/sprechende-objekte>

6 The author is aware of the critical assessments of Laufer's work on the Amur peoples. Yet we should bear in mind that our perception of Indigenous cultures is always shaped by the intellectual climate (*Zeitgeist*) of a given era. Early ethnographies, for example, sought to describe and explain Indigenous cultures through their relationships and connections: Franz Boas, as the initiator of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition, approached them from the perspective of the Canadian Pacific Northwest, whereas the sinologist Berthold Laufer viewed the cultures of the Amur peoples through the lens of his fascination with Chinese and Manchu traditions. In this context, it is noteworthy that Indigenous craftspeople and artists often ignore such scholarly and other modern outside interpretations when studying these works, drawing instead solely on the detailed descriptions as a source of inspiration for their own creations.

Russian, we discussed ways to make these valuable descriptions accessible to local craftswomen. We therefore decided to republish the book with the Foundation for Siberian Cultures press and include a Russian translation. Like all books from this publisher, it will be freely available online for the Nanai Indigenous community for further study and inspiration. Additional initiatives are being prepared to keep the invaluable knowledge of Nanai fish-leather processing alive.

Anatol's work, shaped at a crucial moment by the pivotal inspirations and opportunities that arose during the *perestroika* era, continues. His critical contributions to the preservation and development of Nanai arts is all the more important nowadays to strengthen the cultural identities of Indigenous peoples in Russia.

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Figures

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- 2 Historical figurines from the Donkan Collection. Viechtach, 2020. Photo: Susanne Schmolke.
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