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E. Rezvan

PETER THE GREAT KUNSTKAMERA 290 YEARS

"I want the people to look and study" Peter the Great

Above the city designed by Peter the Great, and built on his order, hover its three symbols — the angel on the spire of Peter-and-Paul's Cathedral, the ship on the Admiralty building, and the planetary (amphialy) sphere on the tower of the Kunstkamera. Three symbols — of Christian faith, of conquering the enemies, and of comprehending the Universe. And though the armillary sphere was lost in the fire of 1747 and reappeared on the tower of Kunstkamera only 200 years later, Russia’s first public museum, despite all changes, has preserved the spirit of the Age of Enlightenment by taking part in the grandiose task, willed by Peter [1], of making an inventory of the Universe.

Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera) of the Russian Academy of Sciences (MAE RAS) is one of the largest and oldest ethnographical museums in the world. It is the successor to the first Russian state museum, the famous Kunstkamera of Peter the Great, founded by his decree in 1714. The priceless ethnographical, anthropological and archaeological collections housed in the Museum are among the most complete and fascinating in the world. They contain about two million exhibits and reflect the cultural diversity of the Old and New Worlds, forming an integral part of the cultural heritage of all humanity. The Kunstkamera is the oldest museum building in the world. It’s outline is used as the symbol of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

The history of the Russian Academy over the last three hundred years is linked closely to that of the Museum. The museum shared with the country many important milestones for Russian science and culture, including Peter's breakthroughs, the rise of Catherine the Great's epoch in the 19th century, and the achievements of the "great age" of Soviet academic research. We remember our colleagues — many outstanding researchers who were lost to Russian science in the years of wars and revolutions, Stalin's terror [2], and during the fearful years of the Blockade of Leningrad [3]. The most important historical guidelines for the research of the Museum's staff have always been the primacy of science in the system of cultural values of Russia, and what Cl. Levi-Straus once defined in a maxim — "anthropology is the humanism of the 21st century".

Throughout its history the Museum occupied a special place in the structure of the Academy of Sciences. Among the people who headed the Museum in different periods were outstanding scholars: the naturalist, zoologist, traveler, member of the Academy L.I. Shredev; famous orientalists and historians V. V. Bartol'd, B. A. Dorn, V. V. Radlov, V. V. Struve, A. A. Shiferov, N. A. Kisliakov, R. F. Its; specialist in Africa, and correspondent member of the Academy D.A. Oldendorf; philologists and members of the Academy E. F. Farkhutdinov and I. I. Moshchinov.

The scientific activity of many outstanding Russian researchers of the 19th century was connected with the Museum, among whom were the founder of the Russian and European ethnographical sciences, member of the Academy K. M. Baer, and traveller, scholar and public figure N. N. Miklukho-Maclait (traditional cultures of Australia and Oceania). In the Museum, Russian research schools were formed connected with the names and the heritage of such scholars as L.I. Zembrin (Central Asian studies), N. V. Kinner (traditional culture of East Asian peoples), R. F. Burton (the Philippines), L. I. Luvrov (Caucasian studies), D. A. O'Drager (African studies), and Iu. V. Khorozov (deciphering of ancient languages). One can not overestimate the role of the outstanding ethnographers, specialists in Siberian studies, among whom were L. Ia. Sisternen, V. G. Bogoratz and V. I. Ikhelson, who played an important role not only in the development of Russian Siberian studies, but also Russian ethnographical science generally.

Today the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography is not only an academic museum, but also one of the leading research centres of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Here the traditions of the outstanding Russian ethnographers and anthropologists of the 18th—20th centuries are followed. According to the Decrees of the President of the Russian Federation, the MAE RAS ranks among the particularly valuable objects of cultural heritage of the peoples of the Russian Federation.

Today more than 120 researchers work in the Museum, and many of them have been awarded with Russian and international scientific awards and prizes. Many of the Mu-
The first Arabs came to Central Asia in the 7th century AD in the wake of victorious Muslim armies. Since then, many preachers, merchants, scholars and warriors continued to arrive in the region from Arab countries. At the end of the 12th and start of the 16th centuries, several Arab tribes were forced to migrate to the region from Northern Afghanistan by the decree of a new ruler. The Arabs brought along their holy relics, including one of the most ancient Qur’an manuscripts. Muslims believe it to be the very first copy of the Holy Scripture.

It was this manuscript that led us to a Jeynov qiydyk. We were looking for descendants of the Arabs who arrived in this region many years ago. The anthropological forecast was quite unfavorable — traditional Arabic culture was supposed to have disappeared in the Central Asia region. Yet it turned out that Arab culture, their language, customs and traditions still exist. Thus, natives interpret the qiydyk name (Persian: jiyâ-nu nov — “new place”) as the Arabic jiyâ-nu — “we arrived.”

The exhibition, which represents a journey around the Jeynov qiydyk, is an attempt to understand the lives of ordinary people inhabiting the region, and to look at the world from their point of view. We use both traditional museum and modern media technologies to represent ten images of traditional culture: the Qur’an, mosque and prayers, wedding, chicken, woman, bread, man, cotton, carpet. Clay images could have been used, but this list reflects our conception of the way of life of these people, in the way we saw it, during the spring and autumn of 2004 [8].

The exhibition will soon be shown in Tampere, and several other venues will follow in 2005—2006. Attached to the current issue you can find a CD-ROM containing video material presented at the exhibition.

Beside the articles of our Moscow colleagues and friends Acad. Alexander Kudishin and Dr. Maria Reineer, which are publishing in a series that provoked serious interest among our readers, articles presented in the current issue were written by specialists in Oriental and African studies now working in the Kunstakamera Museum. We hope that these works will help our colleagues worldwide to appreciate the true values of both the collections of the Museum, and its scholarly traditions.

People will usually treat their own family albums with special care and attention. An ethnographic museum on the scale of the St. Petersburg Kunstakamera is a family album for the whole of humanity. The Museum is not a cemetery of culture. Cultural heritages accumulated within the museum live and tell their stories first to its own visitors, and then to its visitors. The stories are endless, and many future generations of scholars will discover their specific worlds here.

Today the Museum is undergoing large-scale reconstruction. We hope to celebrate the 300th anniversary of the Museum, the jubilee of the Russian Academy of Sciences, in a renewed and well-equipped research and museum centre that is able to fulfill its mission to foster study, and preserve and popularize the heritage of the cultures and civilizations of the Old and the New Worlds.