

Fragments from the Finno-Ugric past

The National Museum of Finland has over a thousand pieces of textiles in its Finno-Ugric collection¹. Most of these patches are fine embroidery patterns, examples of women's craftsmanship. Patterns were collected especially in the late 19th century and they were parts of women's shirts, women's headdresses or long towels, so called *käspaikat*.

Vast majority of the patches were collected by archaeologists and museum workers Th. Schvindt and A. O. Heikel. They were also interested in ethnology and worked as keepers at the National Museum of Finland and its predecessor, the State Historical Museum. It was founded in 1893, but even before that there were several organizations in Helsinki that acquired objects for their collections. These were the Historical and Ethnographic Museum, the Ethnographic Museum of the Student Unions and the Finnish Antiquarian Society among which Heikel and Schvindt were active.

Fieldwork and the collection of research data were an important part of museum work. Axel Olai Heikel (1851–1924) made collecting trips to as far as central Russia. He travelled among the Mordvins and the Maris in 1880s. During his trips, he also visited museums in Kazan, Moscow and St. Petersburg and explored their collections. Heikel had a broad interest in Finno-Ugric Peoples and their material culture, while Theodor Schvindt (1851–1924) focused his studies more narrowly on the Finnish borders. However, he made an expedition to Tver Karelia in 1882 and collected large numbers of embroidered patterns there.

In my presentation I will examine patches as part of a broader phenomenon, the definition of Finnishness, which took place at a national institution, the National Museum of Finland. I draw on the perspectives of affect theories to understand the emotions and experiences that influenced the fieldwork and the collection of objects. What kind of objects affected collectors and how? I also pay attention to how these fragments, i. e. patches, were analyzed and displayed in the museum. What emotions or aspiration they were intended to evoke in the audience through publications and exhibitions?

¹ The Finno-Ugric collection contains over 17 000 objects in total.

As Sara Ahmed has stated, we move toward and away from objects through how we are affected by them (Ahmed 2010, 32). Embroidered textiles attracted researchers for several reasons. First of all, embroidery offered way to go back in time and place to find some kind of common, imagined and nostalgic Finno-Ugric past. In this sense, patches with beautiful embroidery created a sense of belonging and a sense of community which were important emotions in nation-building (Macdonald 2013, 96-99). In addition, ornaments collected among Finno-Ugric Peoples were utilized in textiles for the purpose to create a feeling of cultivated bourgeois home. For example, Schvindt's (1894–1895) and Heikel's (1899) publications in the end of 19th century aimed to give ideas for decorating home with Mordvin and Karelian patterns. Consequently, embroidery shaped the present moment but also looked to the future at both individual and national level.

I am aware of the fact that Finnish identity and Finnish national goals were partly built using elements from cultural heritage of Finno-Ugric Peoples. This is important to recognise when considering the colonialist overtones of the collection history of the National Museum of Finland and promoting decolonising measures in museum work and collections. Patches that have been ignored in recent research are one way of making visible the reason for existence and the historical context of the Finno-Ugric collection in Finland.

References:

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