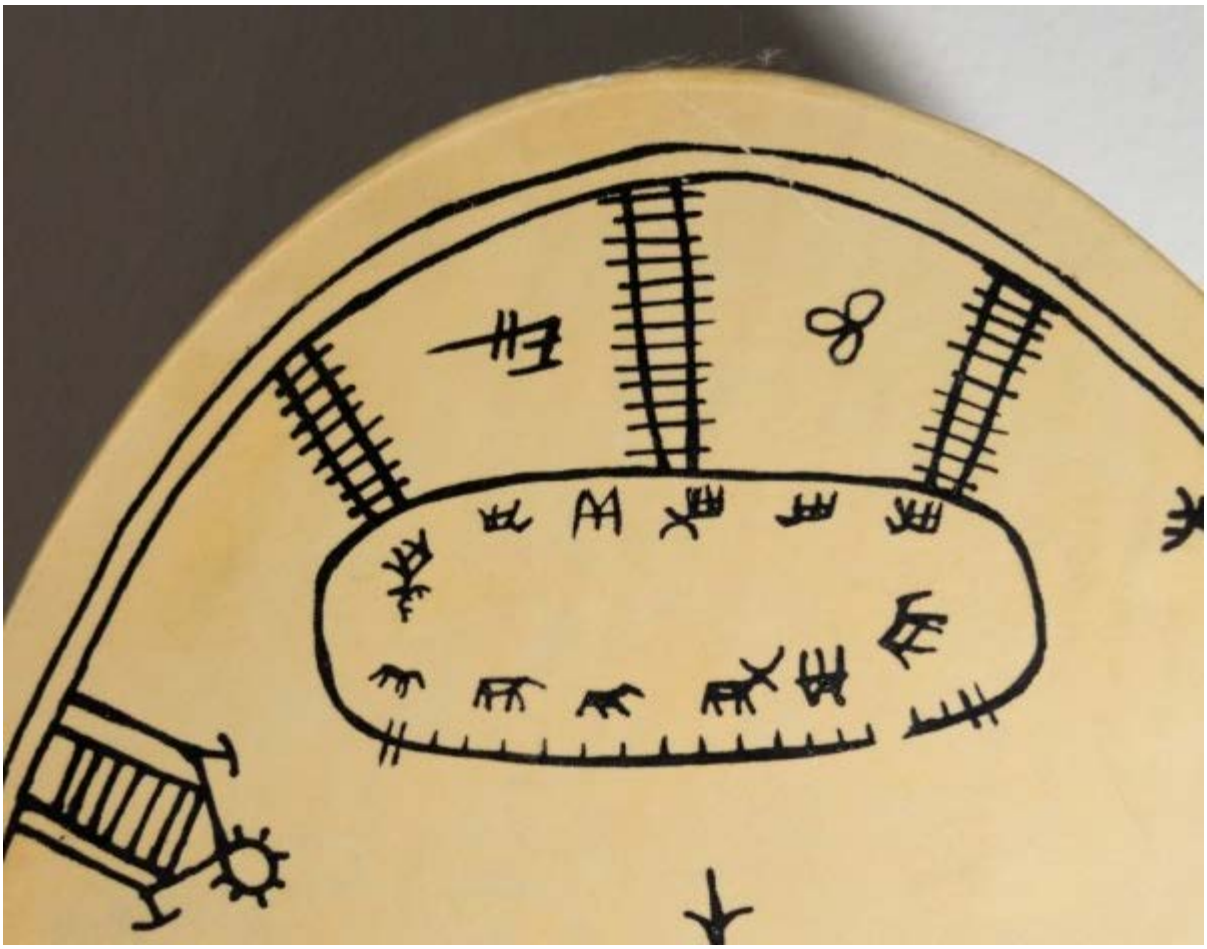
July 23, 2012 - Carrie Keplinger

ART AROUND THE WORLD: THE SAMI OF FINLAND



This is a guest post from Amanda Gynther.

Finland is called the Land of Lakes. I call it my light at the end of the world, specifically the northern end. Finland is a land of extreme temperatures, typically extreme cold. It has long winters where the sun becomes scarce and is not visible at all in the north. In the summer, it appears to be 5 p.m. nearly all day as the sun never goes down. The Finns enjoy a beautiful summer time, rarely too hot, but warm and pleasant. The forests become green and full of wildflowers, and the air is pure and crisp. The birds sing, and there is an uplifted mood to be felt everywhere, from every person.

Personally, I have trouble distinguishing the difference between art and innovation and technology. For me, they are one and the same thing.

Humans have been creating since the beginning of time. We see it in the fossil record. It is written in

bones and in the beautiful pieces of pottery, carved stone Venus figurines, and all the other artfully made and decorated items which humans once used to help them through their days. Today, Finland leads the world in innovation and technology, making them one of the most creative peoples on earth.

I have driven to the mouth of the ocean where the road ends, where you are so far north that you can drive no farther. And, if you were to continue to travel through the ocean, you would only end up at the North Pole. In the far north there live a people who have received little documentation. They do some of the most exquisite tribal art in the world. They are known as the Sami people.

Finns are a reticent people, and as Finns the Sami speak little, choosing instead to express themselves through their innovative technologies and arts. You can find them in northern Sweden, Finland, and Norway. They are the indigenous people of Scandinavia, a large stretch of land to the north that half the world can't even locate on the map.

Like the native population in North America, the Sami create a wonderment of art and have their own distinct language and culture.

Perhaps my favorite kind of art which they make is the Sami drum, a shamanic instrument which they use to make their joiks, a form of chanting or singing. For the Sami people, every thing in the universe has its own joik. The local shaman gives a unique joik like a name to everything from the rocks, to the trees, to each animal, and to every human being. Though each individual joik may sound like one thing one day and something completely different the next, it is always the same joik. Please don't ask me how that works; I was not trained as a Sami shaman, so I really can not explain their magic in full. The Sami beat their drums and they chant. It sounds very similar to the chants of Native Americans, extremely similar actually. It is beautiful.

The drums are generally made from reindeer hide that has been stretched over a wooden base in the shape of an egg. This is interesting as Finland has a very ancient national epic poem called the Kalevala. According to this beautiful written text, an egg broke and the entirety of all that exists spilled out. Most people know nothing of the great epic poem of Finland, but they do know Tolkien's *Lord of The Rings*. Tolkien borrowed from and based his most famous works on Finland's epic and most ancient and beautiful poem.

The Sami use horns from the reindeer often, as a tool to beat upon their egg-shaped reindeer hide drums. But their drums speak on more than just the single level that we are used to associating with percussion instruments, the level of sound. Upon their drums, the Sami paint stick figure symbols in ochre, reindeer blood, ink, or any number of substances. They draw a story onto their instruments. As a musician, I find it touching because many of these stories, if you could read them, deal with gods such as Ukko the god of thunder and many other similar gods of the Sami and the ancient Finns. They draw these symbols lovingly onto the hides of the reindeer they have raised, and which they farm and eventually kill, and consume and utilize to the fullest.

I have been fortunate to sit in the cold night watching the northern lights play in the sky while several of these magical drums were beaten at the same time. In such moments in the darkness, as you look at the sky and hear the call of the drums, you hear the gods and the wild that remains in all living things. You feel a light inside yourself being turned on as the sound and the stories on the drums call to your heart and soul. They spirit you off on a journey through the forest of your own internal workings.

The Sami people make many things, not just beautiful drums, but also gorgeous wool hoods and jewelry. They have even turned knife-making into an incredible art form. I have been so fortunate to experience Sami art. And, I am so happy to be able to carry some back home with me so that I might share the light at the end of the world with everyone who may never have the opportunity to see it.

I have been to many places, and I am not done traveling just yet. So come with me on my nomadic voyage around the globe. And please, see that art is everywhere and every culture makes it. It is the thing that most unites humanity. We as a species stood and walked upright, allowing us to utilize our hands in a wide range of ways to make beautiful art. It is this alone, perhaps, that makes us one

race, a human race. So come with me and discover what others are making elsewhere in the world. I would love to have you along for the ride.

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Amanda Gynther began traveling in her early teens to see what existed beyond her own backyard. Today, she continues her travels with her husband and keeps a blog to track the adventure. You can find her on twitter, on Facebook, and on Etsy. Amanda is a lover of good food, good music, international good times, crafty things, art, and good company.