

## Minority peoples' cultural heritage in museums: Finno-Ugrian peoples' cultural heritage in museums:

### The Finnish Cultural Foundation's support to Russia's Finno-Ugrian peoples

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#### Background

The Finnish language belongs to the Finno-Ugrian family of languages. In addition to Finland, in the European Union Finno-Ugrian languages are spoken in Hungary, Estonia, Lithuania and Sweden. Peoples that speak Finno-Ugrian languages also live in a vast area of Russia. The languages spoken by them belong to the world's endangered languages. A language becomes endangered when its transmission from parents to children in the home becomes rarer.

The Finnish Cultural Foundation aims to stop this process and achieve a reincrease in the number of speakers of these languages. In 2006 the Finnish Cultural Foundation granted €400,000 for the enforcement of the cultural heritage of Finno-Ugrian peoples living in Central and Northwestern Russia over a period of three years. In 2008 another €150,000 was granted for the preservation of the cultural heritage of the Khanty and Mansi.

Part of the funds was directed at the Museum of Cultures via the MA Castrén Society, which has the best contacts with Russia and is experienced in work for the benefit of Finno-Ugrian peoples. Our native language is part of our cultural heritage. Museums can participate in native language education under their museum pedagogical programme in the museum environment. As preservers of cultural heritage, museums have the opportunity to promote peoples' identities and, as memory organisations, network with other cultural institutions and schools.

The aim of the project implemented by the Museum of Cultures has been to design and produce a joint travelling exhibition with the national museums of the Mari El, Mordovia and Udmurt Republic and develop cultural heritage education in the museum environment. In order to strengthen the identity of the Khanty and Mansi, who live across an extensive area in Siberia, a travelling exhibition and textbook were produced in the Khanty language and an online exhibition was produced in Khanty, Mansi, Finnish and English.



#### *The Finno-Ugrian Triptych travelling exhibition*

Cultural heritage is a major part of national self-esteem, which is something every one of us has the right to have. By strengthening national heritage we can also influence attitudes and facilitate the promotion of multilingualism and multiculturalism. In Russia Finno-Ugrian peoples have always lived in multilingual areas and multiculturalism has been part of their everyday lives. In today's globalised world speakers of Finno-Ugrian languages face a situation where they have to consider the significance of their native language and cultural heritage while under pressure from the dominant language and culture.

The Mari, Mordvins and Udmurts live in Central Russia on the Volga bend as minorities in their respective republics. Mari, Komi, Mordvins and Udmurts who live in rural areas speak their native language, and these languages are also studied as a foreign language in schools. In the cities – Saransk, Izhevsk and Yoshkar-Ola – few people choose to speak their native language amidst the pressure of the mainstream

population and no longer regard their national cultural heritage as their own.

*The Finno-Ugrian Triptych* is composed of three independent parts. The Mari exhibition “The Three Totems / *Kum Totem*” highlights the meaning of the animistic religion as a part of their ethnic identity. The Mordovian museums present “Folk costumes through the ages / *Pingon sjormatkst pingen vikshnevks*” showcasing the colourful Mordvin national dress in life-size prints. The Mordvin women have been an important theme for the local artists since the 1840s. These works of art have been turned into a series of pictures that are reflected into a golden frame on the wall. The Udmurtian National Museum’s contribution “Three Weddings / *Kuin sjuan gurjos*” juxtaposes the life-cycle celebrations in the past and the present.

Students from Mari, Mordvin and Udmurt backgrounds have participated in setting up the exhibition. Events for schoolchildren are organised in connection with the multilingual exhibition.

The exhibition catalogue printed at the Udmurtian National Museum Press is published in the Mari, Erzya, Moksha, Udmurt and Russian languages.

The project also produced a website of Russia’s Finno-Ugrian museums that is updated by the National Museum of the Mari El Republic. ([www.fumuseums.ru](http://www.fumuseums.ru))

The travelling exhibition was opened in September 2009 at the National Museum of Udmurtia in Izhevsk, from where it moved to the Mordovian Art Museum in the spring and from there to the National Museum of the Mari El Republic in the summer. There is a lot of demand for the travelling exhibition on the lives of the Mari, Mordvins and Udmurts: in spring 2011 it was seen in Syktyvkar and from there it will move on to other Russian museums. Seminars on multiculturalism, accessibility and tolerance were organised in conjunction with the opening of the travelling exhibition. The seminars were participated in by Finnish experts from the Helsinki City Museum, Finnish National Gallery, Gallen-Kallela Museum, Finnish National Museum, Museum of Cultures, Finnish-Russian School, Federation of Teachers of Finnish, and Finnish Museums Association.

As part of the three-year project, the Museum of Cultures hosted two researchers each year from partner museums for a one-month traineeship.

The project resulted in Russia’s Finno-Ugrian museums networking with each other and jointly participating in a museum competition organised in Moscow in spring 2010.

Working group:

Project leader: Curator Ildikó Lehtinen, PhD, the National Museum of Finland/Museum of Cultures, Helsinki

Members of the working group: vice-director Nadezhda Bolshova, the National Museum of Mari-El, Yoshkar-Ola, director Raisa Martynova, the National Museum of Udmurtian Republic, Izhevsk, director Liudmila Narbekova, the Stepan Erzä Art Museum, vice-director Liudmila Shabalkina, the Museum of History of the Mordva Republic, Saransk

### **Online exhibition *From Finland to Siberia***

Distant language relatives of Finns, the Khanty and Mansi live in Siberia, east of the Ural Mountains by the Ob River and its tributaries. Although the number of the Khanty totals more than 22,000 and that of the Mansi 8,000, the number of speakers of Khanty and Mansi is only half that. The languages are endangered, with differences between dialects one of the reasons for this. The Khanty and Mansi live quite far from each other over a vast area in Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug – Yugra. The language of the Khanty who live in the north along the Kazym River differs a fair deal from the dialect of those who live in the east by the Vakh River. There have also been economic changes in the region, with fishing, hunting and reindeer herding the livelihood of fewer people these days than they once were. The Khanty and Mansi are moving to cities and therefore into a different language environment. There is also a huge shortage of language teachers. University-level studies have been cut year after year and are now facing a total discontinuation. Soon the Khanty and Mansi languages will not be taught anywhere. Attitudes also play a role in the disappearance of the languages. Parents do not favour native language studies in the fear that it might affect their children’s success in a Russian-speaking school.

In cooperation with the Federation of Teachers of Finnish, the Museum of Cultures has produced the first travelling exhibition in the Khanty language to support language teaching. Entitled *From Finland to Siberia*, the exhibition tells of the journeys of Finnish explorers among Ob-Ugric peoples. To increase the efficiency of cooperation between schools and museums, a workbook in Khanty has also been published. The project aims to reach young people and so a virtual version of the exhibition was also produced. The online exhibition is the only one of its kind in the Khanty language. It provides information about the lives of the Khanty, Mansi and Finns alike, and the Finnish and English versions make it accessible by a larger group of users.



The project concluded with an international seminar organised from 20 to 21 January 2011 in Helsinki in collaboration with the Finnish National Gallery and the Finnish Museums Association. Presentations and discussions covered the societal impact of museums, the status of minority peoples and the impact of culture on wellbeing. How is multiculturalism visible in Finnish, Estonian and Hungarian museums? What kinds of museum projects are underway in Russia at museums of Finno-Ugric peoples?

#### Information about the project

Project leader: Curator Ildikó Lehtinen, PhD, the National Museum of Finland/Museum of Cultures

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#### Participants:

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“Saving Yugra” NGO, Khanty-Mansiysk

Mansi-speaking children’s ethnocultural centre, Khanty-Mansiysk

#### Organisers:

National Museum of Finland / Museum of Cultures

Finnish Cultural Foundation

MA Castrén Society

The Federation of Teachers of Finnish

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