

The Fish Skin Road

Mapping Indigenous Knowledge from the Lower Amur River
to Sakhalin Island

Elisa Palomino

Preface

William W. Fitzhugh

Director, Smithsonian Institution Arctic Studies Center, Washington, D.C.

These days, it is a rare event when a new technology crucial for sustaining traditional cultures around the world for thousands of years is identified, especially when its products have been known, described and collected by ethnologists and anthropologists for two hundred years. It is all the more unusual when the knowledge and skills required have been 'alive' and were being practiced, without note, in traditional societies across the globe for articles as basic as clothing, containers and various types of accessories. Perhaps more remarkable that this technology produced 'fine art' crucial to signalling social rank and personal status. Could we possibly be referring here to the technology of preparing and crafting materials from fish skin, a material most people today consider a food industry waste product? The technologies involving bark, animal hides and other natural membranes such as gut, stomach and bladder, have been known and described for centuries. Fish skin is the 'dark horse' - little known and considered trash, but in many traditional societies it is a material treasured more than its host. A component of the diet that sustained peoples around the world has escaped the attention of cultural scholars and the wider world - until now.

Elisa Palomino visited the Smithsonian a decade ago with what seemed then like an unusual request - wanting to inspect articles of fish skin. The Smithsonian's anthropology collections have been of growing interest to all sorts of scholars as access has improved with new storage, conservation, cataloguing, internet and photography. Inuit and Unangan (Aleut) gutskin garments have been widely researched and published, but never before had a researcher inquired about fish skin. Nevertheless, a quick inspection of the ethnology catalogue revealed a surprising number of items, including a series of spectacular garments collected from the Northwest Pacific and Amur River region. Several of these garments had been featured in our exhibition *Crossroads of Continents: Cultures of Siberia and Alaska* produced

jointly with Russian colleagues during the 'détente' period of the late 1980s and early 1990s (Fitzhugh, Crowell 1988). A few years later an exhibition of Ainu materials from Hokkaido (Japan) gave the Arctic Studies Center a chance to extend our research and public programs to another northern culture that made extensive use of fish skin for garments and other objects (Fitzhugh, Dubreuil 2000).

Palomino's inquiry almost two decades later stimulated a new focus on a wider range of fish skin materials from Alaska and Northeast Asia. Assisted by Stephen Loring, more in-depth collection surveys were made that resulted in a small fish skin case in 2022 in the Smithsonian Arts and Industry Museum's *Futures* exhibit. Assisted by the Arctic Studies Center's Alaska Office staffed by Aron Crowell and Dawn Biddison, Palomino organized a workshop to explore knowledge of fish skin technology among Alaska indigenous artist and crafts-persons, establishing relationships that sustained her research ever since (see *Acknowledgments*). Building on ASC connections from the Crossroads and Ainu projects, Palomino established connections with Ainu and Amur artists with whom she organized other workshops and exchanges that became the foundation for the present monograph. Concurrently, she expanded her knowledge of fish skin collections in European and North American museums, acquainting curators with their own 'rediscovered' collections, much as she had done earlier at the Smithsonian.

The result of these efforts are presented here in *The Fish Skin Road* from the Hokkaido and Amur area cultures. These peoples – the Nivkh, Nanai, Hezhe and Ainu – (and primarily their women) are the custodians who hold the richest heritage of fish skin technology and craft. Palomino has chosen to feature their knowledge, history and products in a book that is certain to be followed by others from other regions of the North, where these technologies have been practiced for thousands of years and continue today. Their presentation here is enhanced by historical and contemporary ethnographic knowledge, personal familiarity with artists, historical description and photography, information about materials, dyes and copious illustrations – all grounded in specific cultural contexts. These people are the world leaders of contemporary fish skin technology. The knowledge gathered in this extraordinary volume will not only help preserve and revive a 'lost' technology; it will provide models for sustainable materials for a more environmentally friendly fashion industry and will guide anthropological and art museum curators as they consider how best to care for and use their collections. The art and technology of fish skin has been overlooked too long. Palomino has produced a fashion-conscious, culturally sensitive and much-needed Amur ethnography worthy of honorary membership in Franz Boaz's 1897-1903 Jesup Expedition series!