

# Sámi craft, a shadow of art in the art discourse?

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In this article, I will study the position of *duodji*, or Sámi craft, in the construction of a crafts and art theory of an indigenous people – the Sámi. I will examine the difficulties that rise when *duodji* gives up its name *duodji* after becoming involved in art criticism. Sámi craft both has and does not have distinguishing characteristics which are an expression of and have similarities with Sámi design. In discourse, we use a different background for art than for Sámi craft: we approach it through art theory. *Duodji*, or Sámi craft, on the other hand, has historically often been part of anthropological and ethnological discussion. This makes it especially challenging to assess Sámi craft from the point of view of art.

The objective of this article is to present a view that will introduce a new aspect to the overall discussion on Sámi craft. I will study the issue from the perspective of the post-colonialist art theory.

The construction of a post-colonialist theory is based on the experiences that societies have of their own heritage and the colonialist power; it is also based on the prejudices which became rooted in societies in the colonial period and against which we have to fight in the process of decolonization. Colonialism has had an influence on both the colonized peoples and the colonialists. Therefore, I will deal here with how indigenous peoples have “managed” with and adapted to cultural and political influence; I will also deal with how colonialists have created and maintained the image of what they themselves are like and what kind of power of depiction, or representation, they have.

## The critique of art discourse

The post-colonialist art discourse focuses on criticizing the ideological heritage of colonialism (Haageman – Høholt 1999: 126). The goal is to show how the craft and art of those representing “otherness” have been dealt with in European art-historical discussion. However, it is also important to make indigenous craft and art visible and to assume a position in contexts that have not earlier naturally provided room for indigenous influence. In other words, it is important to begin a new *discourse*.

Art contributes actively, through its products, to the social discussion on the post-colonialist condition. This discussion deals with both politics and art forms. This means that art itself is not separated from social life: artists often join and shape the discussion through their art. However, at the same time some artists do not want to participate in the discourse through art; instead, they prefer to emphasize art formal aspects. As a result, a discursive controversy appears when the various ways of understanding the world compete for making their views visible (Jørgensen – Phillips 1998). In the post-colonialist discourse, the focus is on criticizing Eurocentric cultural views and representations (Haageman – Høholt 1999: 121–124). Here, self-representation becomes important, and a work of art depicts the experiences a person has of the post-colonialist period.

Gerald R. McMaster claims that Western art history has reached its end, asking whether the same also applies to aboriginal art history (McMaster 1999: 85). When discussing the “mainstream” of art, Gerald McMaster refers to another artist, Carl Bean, who has joked that the mainstream of art is quite shallow and about to dry out (McMaster 1999: 81). Why is this so? The reason for this is that the concept *art* itself is, just like aesthetics as a subject of study, strongly connected with the development history of the Western world. But since world art history – which is based on European interpretations and analyses – has already embraced the art of marginalized groups, the members of such groups can be part of history in the same terms but in a different way. McMaster claims this on the basis of his view that, in art, there is no uniformity (ibid. 85).

## Representation

Representation is a concept in post-colonialist criticism which can be understood in many ways. According to Gayatri Spivak, the theory of representation can be divided into two parts: one that deals with ideology, meaning and subjectivity, and another one that deals with politics, the state and law (Spivak 2000: 75). *Representation* and *depiction* deal with for whom we speak, whose ideology we represent when we speak, whom we represent when we depict things and what our experiences are when we depict.

In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said explains the term *representation* as the way in which the Western world has viewed and depicted “colonialist others” and, at the same time, created a representation of itself. In the book, he describes how the view of what the Orient is has been formed (Said 1997: 64–67). His book does not deal with the cultures which make up the Oriental countries: it is about how the West depicts (re-presents) its opinions and world-views (Loomba 1998: 43, see McEvelley 1999: 96). In his criticism, Said claims that we make a difference between the West and the East as a result of the Western view that the Orient is an unchanging culture; therefore, we have a term like the *orient* (Said 1997). According to Said, everything that the authors of the Western world published about the Orient during the Enlightenment and colonialism was written in order to depict an exotic, backward “other” (Said 1997). Thus, the East became the opposite of the West.

Vuokko Hirvonen compares the term *Orientalism* to *Lappology*. According to her, the concept *Lappology* could be used in the same way as Said’s concept to analyze how outsiders have depicted the Sámi ever since the days of Schefferus’s book *Lapponia* (Hirvonen 1998: 27). Indeed, we can say that both representation (the *vertreten* of Spivak) and depiction (the *darstellen* of Spivak) have been the focus of both *Lappology* and *Orientalism*.

The concept *representation* can be divided into three parts: 1) The representation of others. This happens when someone represents people from other cultures, for example when the politicians and researchers of a dominant population say that they represent peoples that are not able to represent themselves. Gayatri Spivak calls such representation *vertreten* (Spivak

2000: 76–146). 2) Here, representation, or depiction, means that others tell the world what cultures are like. Spivak calls such representation *darstellen* (ibid.). This also refers to the situation in which a work of craft or art depicts or re-presents an aspect of society or the thoughts of the craftsman or the artist. 3) Self-representation. This is the opposite of representation and depiction by others. In it, the terms of the people that are being discussed or represented are taken into consideration. However, from the post-colonialist perspective, the colonial conditions have often had a strong influence on the self-representation of those living under colonialism.

The concept *representation* has, then, been used in a hierarchical way when dealing with European artists (or those who share this tradition) and the artists of other nations who do not share the European art-historical tradition.

## **Self-representation**

*Self-representation* emphasizes and makes visible the discourse on Sámi craft and art from the point of view of marginal craft and art. Still, self-representation also runs into difficulties, since the understanding of what craft and art are is almost bred in the bone in all of us. The craftspeople and artists of the nations that emphasize ethnicity are expected to represent their nations both through their works of craft/art and personally, while the artists of the European art tradition represent only themselves. The present view of art is based on a theory – created during Kant’s days – which had the freedom and autonomy of art as an ideal (Phillips – Steiner 1999: 3–9). The other craftspeople and artists except the ones who have shared this idea (that is, the artists of the Western world) are expected to *represent*, in some way, their own cultures, whereas a Western artist is just an artist (Lundahl 2000: 11). The craft and art of the former ones carry characteristics that represent their cultures, which results in double representation (ibid.). This became quite clear when the artist Synnøve Persen said in the paper *Min Áigi* a few years ago that art was universal. According to her, the name *Sámi artist* is a burden and something that she feels uncomfortable about, because ethnic categories should not be applied to art (*Min Áigi*, No. 69, 2002). Does this mean that the term *Sámi artist* produces negative image/associations in the same way as for example *lapp/finn*

(“Lapp”)? We cannot say so as the term *Sámi* has been created by the Sámi themselves. Thus, the problem is not the actual term *Sámi artist*, but the kind of expectations that fall on Sámi subjects. I will give an example. If an artist creates art that can be clearly defined as Sámi art because of its “clear” Sámi characteristics, he/she is a Sámi artist. Here, it is easy to understand that the term *Sámi artist* becomes a burden, as the norm has been determined in advance and, therefore, art is by no means free. Nevertheless, there is a difference between a situation in which craftspeople or artists are expected to represent their home region and a situation in which they *use* their experiences of their home region in their production. Thus, there is a difference if Synnøve Persen is expected to paint reindeer in order to be considered a Sámi artist and if Nils-Aslak Valkeapää paints reindeer because the idea rises from his experiences of life.

Globalization has resulted in providing different cultures with common frames of reference, but, at the same time, it has also allowed us to strengthen and revive local features (Eriksson – Baaz – Thörn 1999: 40). This, again, has aroused new questions that concern nationality, citizenship, political power; they also deal with what kind of legitimacy and cultural and political influence nations have. Thus, globalization and multiculturalism give us the opportunity of learning about the unknown, but they also make it possible for a nation to strengthen its identity. Stuart Hall notes that, in the building of a post-colonialist theory, we must be able to, and we need to, emphasize differences as concerns identities in order to be able to see and accept similarities. This is needed when a people establishes (positions) itself as a nation. Hall deals with the construction of self-esteem (from the constructivist perspective of identity), and, according to him, cultural self-esteem is built in certain contexts and is, thus, linked with contexts (Hall 1999: 81–99).

In connection with its founding in 1979, the Sámi Artists’ Association SDS chose to use the term *Sámi artist* (*sámedáiddár*) instead of using the word *Sámi craftsman* (*sámeduojár*). At that point, the concept *Sámi artist* or *indigenous artist* did not exist or was not a natural concept, as there had been no room for it in art history. In the late 1970s, Sámi artists began to build up their self-esteem as Sámi artists. Many of the artists involved in this had a degree in art. They wanted to show their ethnic background but they also wanted to be part of the

world community of artists. In this situation, the term *Sámi artist* could be fitted with the art theoretic framework easier than *Sámi craftsman* would have been. And this was accepted.

Today, the term *artist* is used in Sápmi, and, as concerns Sámi art, the Sámi Artists' Association SDS has also accepted craftspeople as its members. Still, not all skilled craftspeople are accepted as members. The reason is not that they would not be skilled enough in crafting, but that they do not fulfil the artistic criteria set by the association to its members. The craftspeople who make "folk art" (as defined by the SDS's art vocabulary *Sámi Dáiddárleksikona*) are often the ones who are denied membership (SDS 1993: 11). While these craftspeople are praised as being the ones who pass down Sámi craft to new generations, they are not allowed to join the general discussion on Sámi art.

When artists and craftspeople make use of their cultural experiences in crafts and art, they run into the difficulty that they represent, or are expected to represent, a collective. Furthermore, if they use the term *ethnic* but do not actively use "ethnic characteristics" in their art, the audience still expects them to represent and express a common view. This is the way I understand Persen's criticism. Apparently, a product created by an ethnic craftsperson or artist represents the community instead of *expressing* the way in which the craftsperson or artist interprets his/her experiences. According to Mikela Lundahl, such "representation" can be called double representation (Lundahl 2001: 11), if we assume that the craftsperson represents the view of the ethnic group and his/her craftwork, again, shows a common ethnic way of crafting.

As concerns representation, the term *Sámi craftsperson* can be considered as local instead of universal, as the craftspeople have the local area as their starting-point. Thus, craftspeople can represent their own region without this becoming a burden for them. Even so, they neither represent an unchanging culture nor a common way of crafting. I will take an example. If a craftsperson creates a work of craft and calls it a piece of Sámi craft, the people who look at it but are not familiar with Sámi craft may get the idea that the work is a collective product, a work of craft made by "a Sámi" and not by N.N. This keeps up the view

that a work of craft represents Sámi culture instead of craftspeople representing both themselves and Sámi culture.

It is no wonder that craftspeople and works of Sámi craft have clear ethnic characteristics and that works of craft have both implicit and explicit “Sámi” purposes. Problems arise when a work of craft is not a distinguishing characteristic but is still interpreted as one.

Both non-Sámi and Sámi have often considered Sámi craft as a common tradition of the Sámi, which has also given it certain distinguishing characteristics. In such a situation, it becomes increasingly important that a work of craft manifest the tradition of Sámi craft. It has features that show that it is part of *duodji*, and both the practised and the unpractised eye recognize these features. Often, there are also norms that concern the making and using of such works of craft. These aspects have been analyzed by Maja Dunfjeld in her doctoral thesis (Dunfjeld 2001) and by many other researchers (see also Guttorm 1993, 2001). Such works of craft are often an expression of our understanding of what “made by Sámi” means. They follow the acceptable and high-quality ways of crafting among the Sámi. In general art criticism, as well as in Sámi discourse on art, these works of craft are the first ones to be excluded. This gives rise to the questions whether *duodji*, or Sámi craft, is free if it has to observe so many “rules”, and whether these aspects are the reason underlying the fact that *duodji* cannot carry the name art? Whose criteria for assessment do we apply when we interpret craft from the perspective of art? What kinds of evaluation norms do we follow in such cases?

The craftspeople’s experiences as a Sámi and a human being must be connected with some context so that we can understand works of craft in terms of the present. Still, this does not mean that people who are not part of this context cannot interpret the work of craft from their point of view. If I make a Sámi knife but do not decorate it in any way, some Sámi may call it a half-finished piece of craft; they may also think that my departing from the “collective conventions” shows that I have misunderstood “personal freedom”. Non-Sámi may say that a Sámi work of craft should not look like that (if they are used to seeing certain types of knives and sheaths). On the other hand, if they have not seen any works of Sámi craft earlier, they

may think that this is apparently what Sámi craft looks like (thinking that Sámi craft is a product of an unchanging culture and that the product of an individual craftsperson must therefore be a product of all the Sámi).

On the other hand, if a craftsperson “deviates” from the tradition, his/her work of art probably no longer represents *duodji*. Here, the problem is what to call and how to evaluate such a product. If we assess *duodji* by the criteria of art, it may be left outside art critique if it complies too strictly with traditional design; on the other hand, even if it departs from tradition, it may still be called traditional design by someone who is not familiar with the Sámi tradition. Consequently, representation becomes a burden. Jean Fisher asks interesting questions about how many indigenous craftspeople and artists are “real” craftspeople/artists, if they are not supposed to change anything. She also asks whose thinking they then represent: the ones who think that cultures (here, aboriginal cultures) are unchanging, or the ones who – as members of a culture and each with their own frame of reference – approve of the changes (Fisher 1993: 305).

McEvelley asks whether the present art world welcomes unfamiliar works of craft made by other nations with such openness that they can, when assessed, be connected with a greater number of contexts (McEvelley 1999: 96). But he also realizes that the views of indigenous peoples must change. Both art traditions (of the Western world and the peoples that have been outside it) must stand ridicule and criticism in the necessary process of leaving their present positions (McEvelley 1999: 97).

McMaster calls such a new path a new *language game* (McMaster 1999: 85), and, by this, he means that which is expressed both as part of artistic expression but also in art discourse. In the same way, the post-colonialist approach, too, enables us to take into consideration the starting-point when looking at craft and art. I would add that we also need to have the courage to depart from conventional research methods and the patience to be the object of criticism.



## **Works of craft and art join the discourse**

What happens when art joins the discourse? In that situation, art can be interpreted from a post-colonialist perspective. Art gets involved in the discussion, criticizing and reproaching the basic thoughts/ideologies of the colonial heritage and the ways in which the Western world has dealt with this heritage (Haagemann – Høholt 1999: 121-126). According to Haagemann and Høholt, this has meant that art focuses less on formal aspects (practice) and aesthetic values. Instead, it becomes a narrative which expresses important goals (ibid.). Topical opposites appear, and political and cultural criticism is manifested in the works of art; this, in turn, may affect the aesthetic quality and the autonomy of art as a result of the contextualization of art (ibid: 136). Many researchers criticize post-colonialist thinkers and theorists for not tying the legitimacy of art to quality but to place (see Edwards 1999: 263–277). Young Man emphasizes that this does not mean that the artists would not know enough about the formal aspects; these just do not become the most important thing (Young Man 1986). Instead, artists make use of their aboriginal experiences when they express themselves and join the social discourse through their art. Here, art clearly has a goal. In this way, we can also examine how indigenous peoples and other nations that have been excluded from art history are making history.

## **Sámi works of craft and art as hybrids**

In this context, we can use the concept of *hybridity* in analyzing, for example, Sámi craft. For instance Homi Bhabha has used this concept (Bhabha 1999: 283–285 and Childs – Williams 1997: 122–123). Even so, we cannot say that differences do not mean anything for him. Bhabha studies similarities that exist between different nations, applying the term *hybridity* to products. In hybridity, we find ambivalence, fear, determination, anger and masochism, and the desire to be simultaneously on both sides (ibid: 124). According to Bhabha, these aspects exist both in the colonialist and those living under colonialism. Therefore, the post-colonialist discourse must have hybridity as its paradigmatic starting-point (Childs – Williams 1999: 123). Bhabha mainly focuses on the people who have lived outside their indigenous areas, looking at their works of expression, which thus appear “in a third room”. When analyzing the situation of the colonist and the colonialist “other”, Bhabha speaks in general terms; he

does not link the experiences to certain contexts. Neither does he deal with the fact that there are cultures which have lived outside the culture of the dominant population.

Homi Bhabha calls the process of using one's background actively in one's works of expression "cultural translation" (Bhabha 1999: 285). It means that people are always experiencing something, both in their own environment and in encounters with strange environments. When one makes these meetings visible, the expression becomes the result of meeting. Bhabha uses the ones who have lived in diaspora as an example. This means that craftspeople or artists may live far away from their "home region". A Sámi who has grown up in the USA without ever really visiting Sápmi may have a very different idea of what Sápmi is than the ones who live in Sápmi. Consequently, his/her craft and art may show this. Such a person's experience of Sápmi may be based on things he/she has heard and read rather than his/her own experience. Here, we can use the term "hybrid" for a product that has been created in diaspora.

According to Spivak, the concept *hybrid* is a complicated concept, as it often excludes local experience from the norm (Spivak 1999: 270–273). In such a case, the hybrid becomes the norm, and, for example, a person who sews reindeer skin shoes is not considered a real innovator, even though the local community may consider her/his works of craft to be of high quality. However, the opposite can also be true: for example, the local community may not accept the hybrid product, because it does not fit the local norm.

### **An unpractised eye meets works of Sámi craft**

How should we then evaluate products which are not familiar to us? According to Margaret Dubin, art criticism does not contain strategies for assessing unfamiliar products, and, therefore, experienced art critics apply an approach which is used in Western criticism (Dubin 1999: 149–162). In such a case, opposites, such as traditional/modern and crafts/art, come into focus. The difference between *traditional* and *modern* often refers to how the viewer has learned to see "others". Dubin continues that the distinction between handicraft/work of craft and art appears in the assessment which is done in the name of

quality, but, often, the real issue is whether the object is traditional or modern according to the *viewers'* understanding. As a result of this, aboriginal works of craft and art are not even dealt with by art criticism (Dubin 1999: 154).

Steve Edwards, in turn, is of the opinion that all nations have had their own ways of expression which have required both thinking and doing; these nations have also had their artistic conventions that they have based their evaluations on (Edwards 1999). Some works of craft may not be called art, but many works of craft have features or aspects that can be explained and evaluated through the same methods as art. This is the way I understand McEvelley's cultural relativism (McEvelley 1999: 96). This provides great challenges for Sámi craft. In *duodji*, we have assessment criteria for almost everything – from the material to the finished object – that we still use and can use. What kinds of assessment criteria should we then use when such a work of craft is moved into a glass case in a gallery?

## Conclusion

*Duodji*, or Sámi craft, and Sámi art both share a common history but also have their special histories. Sámi craft has often had the culture as its starting-point; it has been contextualized. Sámi art contains features of Sámi craft, but also features that are connected with universal art.

If Sámi craft wishes to join art discussion, it needs to overcome many difficulties. Firstly, the position of *duodji* is marginal compared to that of Sámi art in terms of the usual, or universal, understanding of art. Secondly, Sámi craft is in an even more marginal position in relation to Western art. However, we must also ask why artists feel that Sámi craft has become a burden for them and what are, in that case, the attitudes kept up by Sámi craft? Furthermore, art and Sámi craft may have their separate views of what good craft and art are. What kind of knowledge does Sámi *duodji* versus art represent? In this discussion, we must also have a look at what kind of attitudes we convey when we talk about *duodji* and art?

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