



*Rose Camara*

# The indigenous origins of Russia leather

In 1786 *Die Frau Metta Catharina von Flensburg*, a two-masted sailing ship, was en route from St. Petersburg, Russia, to Genoa, Italy. It carried a six-person crew and hundreds of bundles of Russia leather, made from reindeer hide. Caught in a worsening storm, the vessel docked in Plymouth Sound on the southwest coast of England. The *Metta Catharina* was not spared, though. The tempest ripped her from her anchor and smashed her into rocks near Drake's Island. The crew survived, but the ship sank 98 feet to the bottom of The Sound, and there lay derelict for nearly 200 years.

Between 1973–2006, the Nautical Archaeology branch of the Plymouth Sound British Sub-Aqua Club, led by Ian Skelton, excavated the shipwreck. They made an extraordinary discovery: the cargo was mostly intact. While the outer layers of the bundles were decayed, the inner layers had been preserved due to the stable, oxygen-free environment.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Russia leather was a valuable luxury material, in high demand across Western Europe and the American colonies. It upholstered furniture, lined coffins, and made bags, shoes, and saddle goods. Treated with birch oil and seal fat, it was known for its softness, suppleness, water resistance, insect repellence, distinctive aroma, and diced pattern on the hair side. Luxury goods today continue to be made from the surviving leather, attesting to its durability.

Rather than focusing on the fate of the *Metta Catharina* and the continuing use of its cargo by contemporary leather brands, such as George Cleverley, here I want to look in another direction: to this leather's possible origin with Indigenous peoples such as the Chukchi, Evenki, Khanti, Mansi, and Nenets. It may well be that all those hundreds of reindeer hides, salvaged from the submerged wreckage, were originally extracted as spoils from the Indigenous groups of the far North.

This story begins with the Russian conquest of Siberia, from 1580 to 1778. A major motivation for the incursion was 25

the collection of hides: sable, fox, beaver, marten, and reindeer skins, gathered by confiscation, barter, or an annual fur tax, known as Yasak. These furs, as well as leather, were collected in fortified zimov'ies, or winter camps, that eventually developed into larger settlements. At the time of the sinking of the *Metta Catharina*, the resources extracted from the Indigenous populations amounted to fully one-third of the Russian Empire's wealth.

Reindeer facilitated Indigenous wellbeing in many forms: food, garments, shelter and transportation. Nenets clothing, for example, is the result of centuries of migration and adaptation to arctic climate conditions. The thick guard hairs and dense underfur of the reindeer hides work together to prevent air movement and heat dissipation. In a study led by Michigan State University in 2020, researchers documented the insulation qualities of Chukchi reindeer clothing, which are superior to modern military-grade down equipment.







Reindeer were also significant in a religious context. In Siberian shamanism (the word “shaman” comes to English from the Evenki language), the animal’s hide and bone was used to make ritual tools. An *Evenki* shaman served as an intermediary between people and spirits through drum journeys, while in a trance. The drum was made of a wood loop, oval or circular in shape, with reindeer skin stretched across it. It was struck with a baton known as *pogonyalka*, conceptually a tool for driving the “reindeer” represented by the drum.

*Yasak* had a terrible destructive effect on these practical and spiritual aspects of Indigenous life. It brought all the expected effects of colonization: death by disease, conversion to the state religion (Orthodox Christianity), and the exhaustion of natural resources. The Nenets previously had a hunter-gatherer nomadic lifestyle, with small herds of reindeer that they used for labor. As contact with the Russians became more frequent, and violent, focus shifted to breeding the animals for use in transportation and even in battle. Domesticated herds became the primary source of sustenance. Some Nenets abandoned their traditional itinerant lifestyle and moved to towns or the coast for marine hunting.

The Khanty and Mansi, similarly, dealt with near constant demands of the fur tax. So much time was spent hunting that traditional modes of living, diet, and economy were disrupted. The introduction of bread and alcohol led to a dangerous reliance on these goods, which the Russians exploited, raising prices and taking advantage of growing alcoholism in the clans. With the adoption of Christianity, some Khanty and Mansi learned the Russian language and culture, severing the connection with the reindeer as a sacred being.

The trade in leather between the Indigenous peoples of Siberia and the Russian Empire is not just a story of supply and demand, and the hides found in the shipwreck of the *Metta Catharina* are not just miraculously preserved luxury goods. Their origin matters. These reindeer hides are yet another



of people and nature. At the same time, they are surviving evidence of traditional knowledge, and a centuries-old harmonious relationship that tribal people had to the animals around them: moving according to their migration patterns, worshipping their existence, and living in their skin.

# Credits

1. Lindow II (Lindow Man), Iron Age, Romano-British, Human tissue, human hair, human skin, human bone, fur, animal tissue, The British Museum, 1984.1002.1, © The Trustees of the British Museum.
12. Suzy Bennett (British), *Leather tannery*, Fez, Morocco, 2015.
15. Shahnama (Book of Kings) of Firdausi, 1475–1675, Iran, Leather; tooled and gilded; ink on paper, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 13.228.14.
16. Qur'an Bookbinding Inset with Turquoise, 16th Century, Iran, Leather; stamped, painted, gilded, and inset with turquoise, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 56.222.
18. Martinus Van Den Heuvel (The Younger) (Dutch), Leather panel, ca. 1670, Amsterdam, Netherlands, Gilded, embossed, and painted leather, Victoria and Albert Museum, W.67-1911, © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
20. Thunder Elk (Sioux), *Frame Drum*, ca. 1887 (made), 1904 (painted), Dakotas, United States, Wood, leather, sinew (buffalo or deer); metal wire; pigment, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 89.4.3326a, b.
21. Sheath, 20th century, Central Africa, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mangbetu, Leather and tin, Gift of the Gilpin Players of Karamu House, Cleveland Museum of Art, 1929.335.b.
22. Pair of Archer's Gloves, 19th century, Japan, Chamois leather, Cleveland Museum of Art, 1921.401.
23. Training boxing gloves used and signed by Cassius Clay (Muhammad Ali), Post Manufacturing Co., 1960, New York, United States, Leather, cloth, thread, Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2012.173.3ab.
24. Unknown Nenet Maker, Hide, ca. 1780, Russia, Leather, The Chipstone Foundation, 1996.171, Photo credit: Gavin Ashworth.
25. Sue Flood (British), Nenets reindeer herders at camp, Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Region, Yamal peninsula, n.d.
28. Cornelis de Bruyn (Dutch, 1652–1727), *Samojeedse Man*, 1714, Amsterdam, Netherlands, Copperplate print on laid paper, Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library, b11544489.



30. Cadzi Cody (Wind River Shoshone, 1866-1912), *Scenes of Plains Indian Life*, ca. 1880, United States, Elkhide, pigments, Minneapolis Institute of Art, 85.92.
32. Melissa Shaginoff shaving moose hide, 2022, Courtesy of the author.
34. Melissa Shaginoff and Aunt Kari Shaginoff performing Moose Love Poems, 2022, Courtesy of the author.
36. Mary Shaginoff and son Paul Goodlatow, 1934, Courtesy of the author.
38. Trunk, ca. 1750, New York, New York, United States, Sweet or red gum with leather, nails, wrought iron hardware, and paper lining, The Chipstone Foundation, 1997.17, Photo credit: Gavin Ashworth.
39. Gloves, 1824, France, Leather, Metropolitan Museum of Art, C.I.46.59.15a, b.
41. The author wrapped in one style of historic Southern African wear, the Kalahari.
43. Unknown Bangwato maker, *Kaross* (or *kobo*), pre-1899, Botswana, Southern Africa, Hartebeest hide and sinew, Royal Pavilion & Museums Trust, Brighton and Hove Museums, R4007/7.
44. John Masury (American), Fire bucket, 1820, Salem, Massachusetts, United States, Painted leather and metal, Sotheby's.
45. Fireman's parade leather coat (kawabaori) with family crest, 19th century, Japan, Deerskin; smoked resist, Minneapolis Institute of Art, 2019.20.122.
46. Simon Hasan (British), *Twist Bench*, ca. 2010, London, England, Vegetable-tanned leather, steel, Courtesy of the artist.
48. © Anthony Cotsifas / Art Partner Inc.
50. Simon Hasan (British), *Fold Chair*, ca. 2010, London, England, Vegetable-tanned leather, steel, Courtesy of the artist.
51. Bonnie Cashin (American, 1915-2000), *Jumpsuit*, 1963, United States, Leather and machine-knit mohair with elastic waist and metal snaps, RISD Museum, 80.171.8, Courtesy of the RISD Museum, Providence, RI.
52. Shadow puppet of the monkey hero Hanuman in the guise of Ravana's



- heir; from the Thai version of the epic of Rama, 1850-1900, Thailand, Hide with pigments, bamboo, Asian Art Museum, 2006.27.115.1.
55. William A. Wellman (American, 1896-1975), *Wings*, 1927, Paramount Famous Lasky Corporation.
56. László Benedek (Hungarian, 1905-1992), *The Wild One*, 1953, Columbia Pictures / Stanley Kramer Pictures Corp.
58. Steven Spielberg (American, 1946-), *Indiana Jones And The Raiders Of The Lost Ark*, 1981, FlixPix / Lucasfilm.
60. John Landis (American, 1950-) and Michael Jackson (American, 1958-2009), *Thriller*, 1983, Optimum Productions / Album.
62. Jonathan McIntosh (American), *Lucha libre máscaras*, 2012, San Francisco, California, United States.
65. Yohance Joseph Lacour (American), *Florence Flask Pack - Dark Knight*, 2023, Courtesy of the artist.
66. Yohance Joseph Lacour (American), *Sorbet Low - Autumn* (Scarlet/Acorn), 2023, Grain and full aniline leather, Courtesy of the artist.
67. Yohance Joseph Lacour (American), Bespoke bag, 2023, Mixed leathers, Courtesy of the artist.
68. Yohance Joseph Lacour (American), Bespoke bag, 2023, Courtesy of the artist.
70. Leather Shoe with Gilded Decoration, 4th-7th century, Egypt, Akhmim (former Panopolis), Gilded leather, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 90.5.34a.
71. Campeachy chair, 1800-1825, Mexican or Central American, Mahogany and tooled leather, The Chipstone Foundation, 2018.104, Photo credit: Gavin Ashworth.
75. Jesse Ramsden (British, 1735-1800), Gregorian reflecting telescope, ca. 1790, London, England, brass tube covered with green shagreen on brass folding tripod, Science Museum Group Collection, 1925-139, © The Board of Trustees of the Science Museum.
78. Illustration of Susan B. Anthony's alligator purse, Wynne Patterson.
80. Back cover: Jay Sae Jung Oh (Korean, 1982-), *Chatsworth Chair*, 2022, Seattle, Washington, United States, Various plastics, leather cord and plywood, Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94.