

THE MUSEUM OF ANTHROPOLOGY AND ETHNOGRAPHY SAINT PETERSBURG AND THE TEMPORALIZATION OF THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE

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Abstract: Focusing on imperial depictions of the Amur region, this article examines the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, Saint Petersburg (MAE) as a central agent in the production and institutionalization of images of empire. Within the walls of this museum, the imperial elites of Saint Petersburg-based geographers, ethnographers, curators, and museum visitors imagined and constructed the only recently conquered far-eastern portion of the Russian Empire as not only a spatially, but also temporally remote place. Carefully arranged according to the logic of evolutionary anthropology, the exhibition resonated well with the interests of the avant-garde artist and art critic Vladimir Markov, who searched for “primitive art” and visited the collection in 1913. Influenced by the most recent publications of his contemporaries on the interconnections between aesthetics and psychology, Markov found that the objects perfectly embodied the pureness and timelessness he was looking for.

Keywords: Evolutionary Anthropology, Amur region, Henry Lewis Morgan, Leopold von Schrenck, Lev Shternberg

In the autumn of 1913, two young lovers and artists strolled through the exhibition rooms of the Museum for Anthropology and Ethnography (MAE) in Saint Petersburg.¹ Vladimir Markov (1877–1914), born near Riga as Voldemārs Matvejs, had recently published the first Russian-language account of Rapa Nui art, *Iskusstvo Ostrova Paschi* (“*Art of Easter Island*”), and was about to release a second essay-monograph about what he termed “primitive art”: *Iskusstvo Negrov* (*The Art of the N****). Varvara Bubnova (1886–1983), a close friend and spouse of Markov, studied alongside him at the Imperial Art Academy in Saint Petersburg. Both were intimately acquainted with the key figures of the revolutionary art movement that would later be canonized in art historiography from the 1960s onwards as the “Russian avant-garde”. Over the preceding four years, they studied with artists like Pavel Filonov (1883–1941) and exhibited with Natalia Goncharova (1881–1962), Mikhail Larionov (1881–1964), and Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935). Earlier that summer, Markov and Bubnova had travelled together through Europe, visiting eleven ethnographic collections and taking close to 100 photographs. At the time, Markov was recognized as a distinguished art theorist and critic (Howard 2015).

During their visit to the museum, Markov and Bubnova were particularly interested in wooden objects from the Amur region, a far eastern territory that had only been incorporated into the Russian Empire a few decades earlier. Judging by the approximately 30 photographs taken by the young couple in this collection, they were especially captivated by the small wooden spirit figures belonging to the shamanistic tribes along the Amur River.² While some of the photographs show the figures’ full anthropomorphic bodies, others are close-up, portrait-like shots of their silent faces from the front, the side, and back. Why did these particular objects from the Amur region catch the attention of the two young artists? The first clues to this question can be found in Bubnova’s notes:

¹ Parts of this article are developed in more detail in my full dissertation manuscript, forthcoming in 2025, Johanna Hügel: *Kunst, Ethnographie, und das verborgene Leben der Dinge: Saint Petersburg 1890–1920*, Göttingen 2025. Regarding this article, I want to thank both of the anonymous reviewers, whose feedback helped me to sharpen my argument.

² The photographs are stored in the Latvian National Library, LNB RGRN Latvijas Nacionālās Bibliotēkas Rīgas Reto Rokrakstu un Grāmatu Nodaļa [Latvian National Library, Department of Rare Books and Manuscripts], Fond R ; more information on the context of these photographs can be found in Bužinska 2015.

Вскоре после знакомства со скульптурой Африки Матвей заинтересовался и искусством малых народов Севера Азии (Приамурья) - нанайцев (гольдов), нивхов (гиляков), орочей. Мы ходили в Этнографический музей Академии Наук и там делали снимки с примитивных деревянных скульптур, необыкновенных по простоте и чистоте форм. Это были обрубки древесных стволов, по большей части березы, обработанные несколькими искусным ударами топора (или другого примитивного орудия), которые высекали строгое лицо идола, или просто - человеческое. Голова непосредственно сидела на туловище - стволе, который часто сохранял покров коры. И здесь Матвей получал помощь заведующих Музея, которых трогал энтузиазм Матвея. Опять собирался новый материал и записи новой книги.

Shortly after Matvej became acquainted with African sculpture, he developed an interest in the art of the small peoples of Northern Asia (Priamur region) – the Nanai (Goldi), Nivkh (Gilyak), and Orochen. We went to the Ethnographic Museum of the Academy of Sciences and took photographs of primitive wooden sculptures, which were unusual in their simplicity and purity of form. These sculptures were tree stumps, mostly birch trunks, carved with a few skilful axe blows (or other primitive tools) into stern faces – those of idols or simply human figures. The head sat directly on the tree trunk, which was often still covered in bark. Matvej was once again supported by the museum management, who were moved by his enthusiasm. More material was collected, and notes were written for a new book.³

Markov compiled these photographs and notes for his third publication *Iskusstvo Severnoi Azii* (“*Art of Northern Asia*”), which was never published due to his untimely death in 1914 (Bužinska 2015). While his oeuvre is not widely known, and these photographs have been almost completely forgotten, I will demonstrate how they offer a fascinating point of departure into the mechanisms of temporalization and coloniality within the Russian Empire.⁴

I will argue that Markov’s conception of the objects from the Amur region as manifestations of primitive art was not merely based on his personal

³ Varvara Bubnova, *Poslednie Gody Zhisni i Raboty V. I. Matveia. Vospominania* [Varvara Bubnova, *The last years of the life and work of V. I. Matvejs, Recollections*], 1960, RGALI F. 3310, op. 1, del. 33, l. 1–26, here p. 18, translated by the author of this article.

⁴ The only article that features Markov’s photographs compiled in the MAE is Bužinska 2015.

impressions, but it can be historicized and used as an epistemological lens through which to examine how the Amur region was incorporated into the Russian Empire. While the region first gained attention in Russian metropolises and imperial discourse during its conquest in the 1850s, as a space that – through its resources and infrastructural connection to the Pacific Ocean – would enhance the Russian Empire’s prospects of a prosperous future, it had been transformed into a place of “deep time” by the end of the 19th century.⁵ Analysing the writings of geographer Leopold von Schrenck (1826–1894) and ethnographer Lev Shternberg (1861–1927), I will demonstrate how this significant shift in the region’s portrayal occurred. Drawing on Johannes Fabian’s classic work *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (1983), I will argue that the region gained importance in ethnographic discourse as a place where humanity’s deep past seemed to be preserved and could be studied *in situ*. Tracing the depiction of the region from ethnographic discourse to the exhibits of the most popular ethnographic museum of the Russian Empire, I will show how the deep time of the Amur region was conveyed through an arrangement of objects that could be understood even by the untrained eyes of common visitors, thus gaining interpretative authority beyond the limited circle of ethnographers and imperial scientists. As the temporalized landscape of the Russian Empire had already been translated into the materiality of the ethnographic exhibition, it was but one step further to portray the objects from the Amur as primitive art, thereby inscribing an aesthetic from the empire’s fringes into the deep past of humanity.

Depicting the empire as not only spatially immense but also as a landscape encompassing the vast dimensions of human history – from the Stone Age to present-day modernity – provided a seemingly natural justification for the conquest and control of territories that appeared not only geographically remote but also temporally behind. In this analysis, ethnographic knowledge becomes visible not only as a powerful tool for imperial elites, who relied on it to adapt their administrative and governing practices to new imperial subjects.⁶ The

⁵ The term “deep time” has been popularized by Stephen Jay Gould’s *Time’s Arrow, Time’s Cycle: Myth and Metaphor in the Discovery of Geological Time*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA. 1987.

⁶ As Ricarda Vulpius, for example, has shown for proto-ethnographic knowledge in the Russian empire of the 17th and 18th centuries; Ricarda Vulpius: *Die Geburt des Russländischen Imperiums. Herrschaftskonzepte und –praktiken im 18. Jahrhundert*, Köln, Weimar, Wien 2020; for the interconnections between imperial rule and the discipline of physical anthropology, see Marina Mogilner: *Homo Imperii: A History of Physical Anthropology in Russia*. Lincoln 2013.

ethnographic knowledge embodied in the neatly arranged and sorted objects on wooden shelves and in glass cases within the exhibition rooms was also a powerful epistemological tool, making visitors of the ethnographic collection aware of imperial rule and revealing to them their own place within this imperial space-time.

1. Russia's "El Dorado": Imperial Conquest and Imagination of the Amur Region

Turning from the imperial metropolises of Saint Petersburg and Moscow to the eastern frontiers of the empire, it is striking how perspectives on and depictions of the region shifted over the course of the 19th century. As geographer and historian Mark Bassin points out in his monograph *Imperial Visions: Nationalist Imagination and Geographical Expansion in the Russian Far East, 1840–1865* (1999), the Russian conquest of the Amur region in the 1850s was accompanied by a euphoria that linked the region with prosperity, progress, and new possibilities, dubbing it Russia's "America," "California," "El Dorado," or "Russian Mexico" (Bassin 1999, 93f.). While few people in the imperial metropolises were familiar with the region or its exact geographical location before the 1850s, visual representations played a major role in popularizing the region and its annexation within the Tsarist empire. In generating significance for the region, older notions of Siberia as a *zolotoe dno* (gold mine), dating back to the 17th and 18th centuries, were revived, emphasizing firstly the region's agricultural potential and natural resources and secondly its strategic infrastructural position, particularly regarding inland navigation via the Amur and Ussuri Rivers and access to the Pacific Ocean (Bassin 1999, 5–9).

However, these factors only gained significance through the rise of Russian nationalism in the first half of the 19th century. The expansion of the empire into the Amur region appeared to signal a break from the reign of Nicholas I (1796–1855), which was perceived by parts of the imperial elite as a period of stagnation and a revitalization of Russian national consciousness. In this context, the conquest of the region was discussed as a decisive step, promising a glorious and expansive future for the empire. Intellectuals such as Alexander Herzen (1812–1870) placed particular importance on the region for the progress of civilization. Additionally, "Amur euphoria" was tied to the ongoing debate about the Russian Empire's orientation and identification with either Europe or Asia, as it seemed to herald a new era of independence and a shift in focus

towards the empire's eastern frontier (Bassin 1999, 275-80). Thus, the region was considered to represent the bright future of the Russian Empire, with its potential for economic prosperity, territorial expansion, and infrastructural independence. The conquest of the Amur region was even compared to the European conquest of Central Africa (Bassin 1999, 31), drawing parallels between Russian imperial discourses and both the American frontier myth (and thus, settler colonialism) and the colonial euphoria of various European empires. As in European colonial discourses, a fundamental ambivalence is evident here: on the one hand, there was excitement about a possible “conquest” and domination of the territory, while on the other, there was a devaluation of the local population and a focus on economic extraction by the metropolis.

This ambivalence highlights some of the reasons how and why the image of the Amur region in the Russian metropolises and beyond changed in the following decades. As exemplified in Anton Chekhov's (1860–1904) travelogue *Ostrov Sakhalin (Sakhalin Island)* (1893–1895), the region's use as a penal colony from 1881 onward transformed its image into that of a distant, almost unreachable place “at the end of the world”. While this shift did affect the region's living conditions – e.g., through the Russian imperial administration or the spread of disease (Grant 1996) – these changes appear to be more a consequence of altered perceptions of the region than the cause. While Bassin points to economic factors, I will show how the imperial discourse about the region, which emphasized its future potential in the 1850s, shifted in the following decades, and how ethnographic discourse redefined it as a “place of the past”.

2. Imperial Ethnography: Turning the Amur Region into a Place of Deep Time and a Scientific Object of Ethnographic Discourse

The enormous relevance attributed to the Amur region in ethnographic discourse around the turn of the 20th century arose from the prominence of evolutionary anthropology during this period, and the place the people of the Amur region were assigned within this temporalized framework of global cultural diversity. The region emerged as a focus of scientific inquiry in imperial ethnography in the 1870s and 1880s, when the Baltic German/Russian zoologist and geographer Leopold von Schrenck wrote his *Reisen und Forschungen im Amur-Lande (Travels and Research in the Amur Region)*. In these travelogues, von Schrenck introduced a new understanding of the population of the region,

notably bringing the “Gilyak”⁷ into ethnographic discourse as a distinct cultural entity for the first time.⁸ Although this differentiation of the Amur region’s population was based on von Schrenck’s linguistic research, using language as a marker of cultural autonomy,⁹ the true significance of the inhabitants of the Amur region for the emerging discipline of ethnography lay in their temporalization. Referring to the inhabitants of the Amur region, von Schrenck introduced the term *paläasiatisch* (*Paleo-Asiatic*) into ethnographic discourse (von Schrenck 1881, 246f.). He argued that the people of the Amur differed from other groups on the Asian continent, citing their small and dwindling numbers as well as their remote geographical location at the edge of the continent. To this spatial remoteness, von Schrenck added the dimension of time, portraying the Amur as not only a geographically distant place but also one that was temporally removed:

Ausser dem sprachlichen und geographischen Gesichtspunkte möchte ich aber bei Betrachtung dieser Völker auch noch einen dritten, weiteren, historischen Gesichtspunkt geltend machen. Erwägt man nämlich ihre sprachliche Vereinsamung, ihren Sitz am Rande der Continente oder überhaupt verschiedener grösserer Erd- und Völkergebiete, erwägt man ferner die geringe Erstreckung ihrer Wohngebiete und ihre kleine, im Schwinden begriffene Kopfzahl, so drängt sich einem unwillkürlich der Gedanke auf, dass sie nur Reste ehemals stärkerer, weiter verbreiteter und verzweigter Völker sind, gleichsam nur die Ausgehenden einer älteren Völkerformation, über welcher sich durch wiederholte spätere Fluthen neue Formationen abgelagert haben. Da namentlich die ehemalige weitere Verbreitung und Verzweigung dieser Völker unzweifelhaft auf asiatischem Boden, näher zum Innern des Continentes lag, so möchte ich sie, so lange die Sprachforschung keine anderweitigen Beziehungen und Gliederungen nachweist, vom historisch-geographischen Gesichtspunkte in eine Gruppe unter dem Namen der Paläasiaten oder,

⁷ As I am referring to the historical discourses here and in the following, I am using the terms derived from the respective sources.

⁸ Von Schrenck and Shternberg not only wrote the first dictionaries on the Gilyak language, but it was von Schrenck who actually defined the Gilyaks as a distinct “tribe”, supporting his argument with their independent language: “At the time of my journey to the Amur region, it was believed that the Gilyaks were one tribe with the Ainu or Kuril people [...]. If he had known even a few words of these languages, the fable of the ‘Kurils of the mainland’ and North Sakhalin would not have arisen”, von Schrenck (1881), p. 208–210.

⁹ For more background information on the role of language as a signifier of cultural autonomy, see Vermeulen (2015).

specieller, der nördlichen oder nordöstlichen Paläasiaten zusammenfassen. (von Schrenck 1881, 246)

In addition to the linguistic and geographical aspects, I would like to emphasize a third, further, historical aspect when considering these peoples. If we take into consideration their linguistic isolation, their location on the fringes of the continents or of various larger areas of the earth and peoples in general, if one also considers the small extent of their living areas and their small, dwindling population, the thought inevitably arises that they are only the remnants of once stronger, more widespread, and branched peoples – outgrowths of an older population structure, over which newer groups have settled through successive migrations. Since the earlier, wider distribution and branching of these peoples was undoubtedly centred on Asian soil, closer to the continent’s interior, I would like to group them, as long as linguistic research does not prove any other relationships and divisions, from a historical-geographical standpoint, under the name “Paleasians” or, more specifically, the “northern” or “northeastern Paleasians”.

This initial description of the Amur inhabitants as “paleoasiatic” coincided with the rise of evolutionary anthropology, popularized by works such as *Prehistoric Times, as Illustrated by Ancient Remains and the Manners and Customs of Modern Savages* (1865) by John Lubbock (1834–1913), *Primitive Culture* (1871) by Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917), and *Ancient Society* (1877) by Lewis Henry Morgan (1818–1881). As the anthropologist Johannes Fabian famously argued in his classic *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (1983), the category of time was essential in defining ethnographic research objects. Evolutionary anthropology derived much of its legitimacy as a discipline from the claim that it could uncover the early, unknown history of humankind – one not traceable through traditional historical methods due to the absence of written sources – by drawing parallels with contemporary societies that had not yet been integrated into global infrastructures of transportation and communication. Therefore, these societies were believed to have not yet arrived in modernity. In this context, the Amur region seemed like a particularly promising ethnographic “discovery”.

This depiction of the region reveals more about the perspectives of the Saint Petersburg-based scientists who were creating, disseminating, and receiving this geographical and ethnographic knowledge than it does about the region itself or its inhabitants at the turn of the 20th century. Inscribing the logic of evolutionary

theory into the empire's peripheries served not only to legitimize the discipline of these imperial scientists but also to reinforce their own subjectivity and professional status.¹⁰ Regarding the Amur region, these scientists were not the first to “discover” it, nor were its inhabitants the isolated remnants as portrayed by von Schrenck. On the contrary, the Amur region had long been a zone of intensive cultural and economic interdependence between the Chinese, Japanese, Russian, and Korean empires, with its inhabitants being attractive trading partners (Grant 1996, Sablin 2019). This is also evident in the multiple interconnections and references in the material and visual culture of the Amur region.¹¹

Only by relating the region solely to its new imperial metropolises did it appear distant, isolated, and remote in both space and time. However, through the study of its inhabitants, it seemed possible to explore the roots and origins of human history on the soil of the Russian Empire in contemporary times. This new interest was part of a broader quest for a “native antiquity” (Kunichika 2015) of the Russian Empire. Whereas Rome and Athens had served as primary historical reference points during the reign of Peter I. (Kalb 2017, Meyer 2017), and Byzantium was added as a key historical anchor point in the first half of the 19th century (Taroutina 2018), the search for a deep past from the second half of the 19th century onward largely took place east of the Urals: in the Central Asian steppe (Kunichika 2015, Dmitrieva 2009, Biyashev 2023) and the Far East (Slezkine 1994).

The Jewish political activist Shternberg, who was sent to Sakhalin in 1889 as a convict and inmate of the penal colony (Kan 2009, 25), would take this quest further. While von Schrenck had introduced the term *paleoasiatic* to the region, thereby laying the foundational stone for making it a place of deep time, he was more a geographer and zoologist than an ethnographer. As a result, he justified the originality of the Amur region primarily in geographical terms: with its location on the edge of the continent. It was Shternberg who would root the primordality of the region and its people in their customs and culture and popularize its inhabitants as a scientific object of ethnography.

Shternberg's engagement with the Amur region can be traced back to his very first stay there from 1889 to 1897 (Kan 2009, 25f.). When he arrived in the

¹⁰ For the mutual creation/stabilization of research object and scientist, see Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*, Cambridge 1999, especially chapter three, “From Fabrication to Reality: Pasteur and His Lactic Acid Ferment” (p. 113–144).

¹¹ A fact that von Schrenck already referred to (von Schrenck 1881, 8f.).

Far East, Shternberg had barely been exposed to the discipline of ethnography. He was sent to the Sakhalin penal colony as a prisoner and political exile due to his involvement with Narodnaja Volja (People's Will), a group that advocated for transforming Russian society according to a socialist agrarian revolutionary model. The group gained international attention following their assassination attempt on Tsar Alexander II in 1881 (Kan 2009, 6f.).

This involuntary stay in the region provided Shternberg with the opportunity to learn several local languages and conduct extensive field research – with the permission of authorities who had their own interest in acquiring knowledge about their new imperial subjects (Kan 2009, 40–50). While Shternberg did not have von Schrenck's writings to hand until he returned to Saint Petersburg in 1897 (Grant 1964, 4), another text clearly served early on as an analytical tool for his ethnographic observations: Friedrich Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State: In the Light of the Researches of Lewis H. Morgan* (1884). This text would eventually become one of the core references in Soviet ethnography.¹² Estimates vary as to when Shternberg first encountered this book, but it was no later than during his first years of exile that he studied it thoroughly (Kan 2009, 448). For Shternberg, this monograph was likely his first exposure to the ideas of evolutionary anthropology, which for the rest of his life remained his primary tool for interpreting, organizing, and classifying ethnographic material. In 1893, Shternberg published his first article in an ethnographic journal titled *Sakhalinskie Gilyaki (The Gilyak of Sakhalin)*. In this article, Shternberg classifies the Gilyak people as remnants of another time, incorporating Morgan's evolutionary anthropology into the Amur region. I will closely examine a summary of this article, which was presented at a meeting of one of the most important scientific societies advancing the institutionalization of ethnography as a discipline,¹³ the Imperial Society of Friends of Natural Science, Anthropology, and Ethnography (IOLEAE) in Moscow (here cited in the translation of Friedrich Engels). I will then trace the characteristics used to portray the Gilyak as remnants of prehistory.

¹² For the reception of Morgan and Tylor by Marx and Engels and their imprint on Soviet ethnography, see Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*, Ithaca 2005.

¹³ For a thorough history of the IOLEAE, see Mogilner, Marina (2013): *Homo Imperii: A History of Physical Anthropology in Russia*. Lincoln, London.

In der Sitzung des 10. Oktober (alten Stils = 22. Oktober neuen Stils) der anthropologischen Abtheilung der Gesellschaft der Freunde der Naturwissenschaft in Moskau verlas N.A. Jantschuk eine interessante Mittheilung des Herrn Sternberg über die Giliaken, einen wenig erforschten Stamm der Insel Sachalin, der auf der Kulturstufe der Wildheit steht. Die Giliaken kennen weder den Ackerbau noch die Töpferkunst, sie ernähren sich hauptsächlich durch Jagd und Fischfang, sie erwärmen Wasser in hölzernen Trögen durch Hineinwerfen glühender Steine u. s. w. Besonders interessant sind ihre Institutionen in Bezug auf Familie und Gens. Der Giliak nennt Vater nicht bloß seinen leiblichen Vater, sondern auch alle Brüder seines Vaters; die Frauen dieser Brüder, ebenso, wie die Schwestern seiner Mutter, nennt er allesamt seine Mütter; die Kinder aller dieser ‚Väter‘ und ‚Mütter‘ nennt er seine Brüder und Schwestern. Diese Benennungsweise besteht bekanntlich auch bei den Irokesen und anderen Indianerstämmen Nordamerikas, wie auch bei einigen Stämmen in Indien. Während sie aber bei diesen schon seit langer Zeit nicht mehr den wirklichen Verhältnissen entspricht, dient sie bei den Giliaken zur Bezeichnung eines *noch heute giltigen Zustandes*. Noch heute hat jeder Giliak Gattenanrecht auf die Frauen seiner Brüder und auf die Schwestern seiner Frau; wenigstens wird die Ausübung solcher Rechte nicht als etwas Unerlaubtes angesehen. Diese Ueberbleibsel der Gruppenehe auf Grund der Gens erinnern an die bekannte Punalua-Ehe, die auf den Sandwich-Inseln noch in der ersten Hälfte unsres Jahrhunderts bestand. Diese Form der Familien- und Gentilverhältnisse bildet die Grundlage der ganzen Gentilordnung und Gesellschaftsverfassung der Giliaken (Engels 1892).

At the meeting of October 10 (old style = October 22, new style) of the anthropological section of the Society of Friends of Natural Science in Moscow, N. A. Yanchuk presented an interesting communication by Mr. Shternberg about the Gilyak, a little-researched tribe on the island of Sakhalin, which remains at the cultural level of savagery. The Gilyak practice neither agriculture nor pottery, they live mainly by hunting and fishing, they heat water in wooden troughs by throwing red-hot stones into them. Their institutions in relation to family and kinship are particularly notable. The Gilyak refer not only to their biological father as “father,” but also to all his father’s brothers; they refer to the wives of these brothers, as well as the sisters of their mother, all as “mothers”; the children of all these “fathers” and “mothers” are called “brothers” and “sisters”. This naming system is also found among the Iroquois and various Indian tribes of North America, as well as among some tribes in India. However, while this system has long since lost its

original significance among these other societies, among the Gilyak it remains *a condition still valid today*. Even today, every Gilyak retains the right to marry the wives of his brothers and the sisters of his wife; at least the exercise of such rights is not considered illicit. These remnants of group marriage, based on kinship structures, are reminiscent of the well-known Punalua marriage that still persisted on the Sandwich Islands in the first half of our century. These forms of family and kinship relationships form the foundation of the entire social and kinship order of the Gilyak.

In this article, the temporalization of the region under Shternberg's pen becomes evident. Shternberg presents the Gilyak as the last cultural group known to still practice the defining feature of social organization at the lowest developmental stage characteristic of savagery: group marriage. This gives them enormous significance for ethnographic research: the Amur region represents the last place on earth that could provide firsthand knowledge about the social organization of humanity in its earliest history.

In labelling the Gilyak as remnants of the developmental stage of savagery, Shternberg clearly draws on the scheme of developmental stages that Engels had adapted from Morgan. According to this scheme, all groups essentially pass through the same three developmental stages: savagery, barbarism, and civilization (Morgan 1877). Hence, Morgan's framework contains a clear logic of linear development. While Morgan's classification of human history is based on the assumption that all humans and cultures have the capacity to progress, this progress does not necessarily occur simultaneously, as different groups can be seen as being stuck at different developmental stages, and thus in different times (Morgan 1877, p. 32–48). This can be identified by their cultural practices: while the so-called Punalua marriage points to the lowest stage of development,¹⁴ the so-called “monogamian family” characterizes the highest (Morgan 1877, p. 325–421). Similarly, subsistence economy indicates the stage

¹⁴ Morgan identifies the so-called “Punalua family” as a characteristic feature of this stage (which refers to a complex network of social relations, with “punalua” referring to those partners that have the same spouse). See the third chapter of Morgan's *Ancient Family*, titled “The Punalua Family”, which starts with the following sentences: “The Punaluan family has existed in Europe, Asia, and America within the historical period, and in Polynesia within the present century. With a wide prevalence in the tribes of mankind in the Status of Savagery, it remained in some instances among tribes who had advanced into the Lower Status of barbarism, and in one case, that of the Britons, among tribes who had attained the Middle Status” (Morgan 1877, 339). Engels modified the “Punalua family” and referred to it as “group marriage” (Engels 1892).

of savagery, while the organized accumulation of property characterizes civilization (Morgan 1877, p. 445–468).

Although Morgan specifies a corresponding time period for each developmental stage, it is noteworthy that only the starting point and approximate duration of these stages, and not their endpoint, are defined. In the logic of evolutionary anthropology, all developmental stages could exist synchronously side by side. Thus, with Shternberg's ethnographic "find", the contemporary Russian Empire appeared to encompass an immense span of human history. Morgans estimates "100,000 years as the measure of man's existence upon the earth" and suggests that "the most advanced portion of the human race" spent "at least 60,000 years [...] [in] the period of savagery", 25,000 in barbarity, and the last 5,000 in civilization (Morgan 1877, 41). Thus, Shternberg's text about his contemporaries in the Amur region offered the Muscovites gathered at the 1892 meeting of the IOLEAE the opportunity to travel back in time at least 30,000 years, seemingly embarking on a journey into their own prehistory.

With the involuntary help of his research subjects, over more than three decades as an ethnographer and curator, Shternberg attained the status of a founding father of ethnography in the Russian Empire. He remained one of the most important ethnographers from the turn of the century until his death in 1927 (Kan 2009). He was a key figure in transforming the people of the Amur region – referred to in the Soviet nomenclature from 1925 on as the "small peoples of the Far North" (Grant 1996, 41, Slezkine 1994) – into scientific objects. Through numerous lectures at international congresses and publications in ethnographic journals, he popularized their social institutions and religious practices.¹⁵ Shternberg maintained personal contact and corresponded with influential figures like Franz Boas (1858–1942), Marcel Mauss (1872–1950), James Frazer (1854–1941), and Arnold van Gennep (1873–1957), all of whom shaped the discipline of ethnography at the turn of the century and for the decades to come (Kan 2009, 171–172).

Beyond the specialized discourse of imperial ethnography, Shternberg also played a key role in communicating this scientific knowledge to a broader public. In 1901, he began working at the MAE and curated exhibitions on the Amur

¹⁵ For example, Shternberg published in the ethnographic journals *Etnograficheskoe Obozrenie* [Ethnographic Review] and *Zhivaia Starina* [Living Antiquity] and, quite early on also in international journals, including German ones; see for example, the comprehensive overview of Shternberg's publications Kan 2009, pp. 512–515.

region (Kan 2009, 121). Thus, the metropolitan population of Saint Petersburg viewed the Far East through Shternberg's eyes.¹⁶ In the exhibition rooms of the ethnographic museum, the opportunity to travel back in time with contemporaries from the Amur became institutionalized and accessible to the general public. Shternberg was also responsible for acquiring many of the objects exhibited at the MAE, which Markov and Bubnova admired and photographed during their visit to the ethnographic collection in 1913 (Bužinska 2015). There is no evidence that Markov and Bubnova had read the research literature produced by von Schrenck and Shternberg – yet to them, it seemed obvious that the objects from the Amur were “primitive”. How was this assumption formed? Let us examine the mechanisms of late imperial museology and how the ethnographic discourse about the Amur region was translated into material culture.

3. Imperial Museology: Translating the Temporalized Landscape of the Amur into the Materiality of the Ethnographic Exhibition

When Shternberg took up his position at the MAE in 1901, Vasily Radlov (1837–1918) had just become the museum director seven years earlier and was in the process of transforming it into one of Europe's leading institutions for ethnographic research and its dissemination to the public (Matveeva 2014, Stanjukovich 1987, 123ff.). For this endeavour, a new system was urgently needed to classify the already vast and rapidly growing inventories of the MAE (Stanjukovich 1987, 134). Although the research literature highlights the significance of this new classification system – called the “Copenhagen Classification System” – as the first systematic approach to structuring the vast museum collection since its beginnings in the early 18th century (Stanjukovich 1987, 124ff., Matveeva 2004, 85ff.), no attention has yet been paid to the fact that it provided the basis for a synthesis between archaeology and ethnography, as well as a temporalization of the entire exhibition narrative, as I will demonstrate in the following paragraphs.

¹⁶ To a certain extent, this can even be claimed with respect to the visitors of the American Museum for Natural History New York (AMNH), as Shternberg was not only providing many objects from the region for its director, the organizer of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition, Franz Boas, but also significantly shaped his view on the region when he stayed at the AMNH during several months of a research stay. See Kan 2009, p. 143, 153, 159. Boas also tried to publish Shternberg's opus magnum about the Gilyak in a series of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition, but this was never realized, see Kan 2009, p. xix.

The Copenhagen Classification System, then still referred to as the “three-age system”, was developed by the Danish archaeologist Christian Jürgensen Thomsen (1788–1865) while reorganizing the object inventory of the Royal Museum of Nordic Antiquities in Copenhagen (Thomsen 1836, Hansen 2001). It was essentially based on the materiality of the objects – stone, bronze, and iron. However, other factors were also central to Thomsen’s classification of objects into the various object groups. Particular attention was paid to the context in which the object was found, as well as to the form and function of the objects. Thomsen thus invented nothing less than the division of early human history into the Stone Age, Bronze Age, and Iron Age, which is still in use today (Hansen 2001). The decisive point was that Thomsen did not consider these three object groups to be static, but rather dynamic, as a temporal sequence. This was the first time that a “relative chronology” was established, in which the sequence of prehistoric epochs was based not on an analysis of ancient writings, but on objects (Hansen 2011, 12, Stabrey 2017, 79, 111). Although both Thomsen and the three-age system have received little attention in the research literature to date, I agree with the archaeologist Svend Hansen, who described Thomsen’s three-age system as a scientific revolution in Kuhn’s sense (Hansen 2001, 11; Kuhn 1962). Thomsen’s classification system is nothing less than the first “text-independent dating method” and thus serves as the “scientific foundation of prehistoric archaeology” (Hansen 2001, 17, 10).

It is no exaggeration to say that the invention of the “three-age system” has significantly influenced the development of evolutionary anthropology. One of the works that greatly popularized the parallelization of early European history (archaeology) with contemporary ways of life in the outermost peripheries of the European empires (ethnography) was written shortly after its author had visited Denmark twice and enjoyed a guided tour of the newly arranged collection rooms with Thomson: John Lubbock’s *Prehistoric Times, as Illustrated by Ancient Remains and the Manners and Customs of Modern Savages* (1865) (Hansen 2001, 19).

The “three-age system” was introduced in the MAE in 1896, and its application to the museum collection had two specific effects. First, it gave new meaning to the materials of the displayed objects and related them to time (Stabrey 2017). Second, since the chronology was relative, it allowed for the interweaving of objects from the archaeological and ethnographical parts of the collection. Although the Stone Age seemed to have ended many centuries ago in the part of Russia west of the Ural Mountains, it appeared to have endured

into the present day in the Far Eastern provinces, such as the Amur region. Therefore, this notion resonated well with the basic assumptions of evolutionary anthropology, whose application to the Amur region we have already witnessed at the Moscow meeting of the IOLEAE.

During a short imaginary tour based on the new museum guide of 1904, the first published after the revision of the entire object inventory according to the “three-age system,” we will visit the exhibition rooms of the MAE to see how the systematic implementation of the category of time and the overlapping branches of archaeology and ethnography were put into practice.

In 1904, the MAE had four large exhibition rooms: two on the first and two on the second floor. Additionally, small rooms to the right of the staircase and a platform on the landing between the first and second floors were also used for exhibits. Visitors began their tour of the exhibition on the first floor. After viewing objects from Brazil and Peru in two small rooms to the right of the entrance, they entered the first large room. In addition to objects from America, the first objects from the Amur region could be seen in this room. Objects attributed to the Gilyak and Goldi were displayed here, while other objects from the Amur region, such as those of the Orochen or Ainu, were in the second large room. Visitors could use the stairs to reach the second floor, where they could see objects grouped under the label of “Buddhism” on the landing between the two floors. On the second floor, further objects related to Buddhism were displayed in the first large hall, along with objects from Mongolia, China, Japan, Korea, and India. In the fourth room, visitors could view objects from Polynesia, Australia, and Africa.

In addition to classifications by continent, religion, nation, culture, and “tribe” – which also serve as the headings in the museum guide – the 1904 exhibition guide applies another categorization to structure and suggests a specific narrative for its collection: time. This principle assigns individual entities of “culture” and “tribe” to different historical periods. This structuring approach is evident from the very beginning of the exhibition tour. Upon entering the vestibule,¹⁷ the museum guide informs the visitor which displays objects from Brazil, about “the tribes on the Shinga River”:

Путешественники [...] нашли на р. Шингу (притокъ Амазонки) рядъ племень, находившихся на самой низкой ступени культуры. Полное

¹⁷ On the relevance of the museum guide for visitors, see Franz (2020).

отсутствіе желѣва, господство камня и кости, примитивное гончарное производство, воздѣлываніе культурныхъ растев, [...]. (Imperatorskaya Akademiya Nauk 1904, 2)

The travellers found at the river Shingu (a tributary of the Amazon) a number of tribes at the lowest stage of culture. Complete absence of iron, predominance of stone and bone, primitive pottery, cultivation of crops, uncomplicated weaving [...].

Significance is attributed to “the tribes on the Shinga River” by assigning them to a different time: the emphasis on specific materials (stone, bone, iron) is clearly derived from Thomsen’s three-age system, while the focus on cultural techniques and tools aligns with Morgan’s classification of developmental stages.

How was the Amur region depicted? Referring to the chronological classification systems of Thomsen (based on material) and Morgan (based, among other criteria, on cultural practices and tools), which were already noticeable in the description of objects from Brazil at the start of the exhibition tour, is the exhibition guide makes it clear that the different cultural groups of the Amur region occupy distinct positions in time. Its inhabitants were categorized under the heading “extreme northern Asia,”¹⁸ which was generally placed in a distant past within the exhibition narrative. Among them, the Ainu appeared to have progressed further compared to the Gilyak:

Айны. [...] Аборигены японскаго архипелага, постепенно вытѣсненные японцами на сѣверъ - на о. Есо и южную часть Сахалина. [...] По культурѣ выше своихъ сосѣдей-гилякъ, такъ какъ знакомы съ ткачествомъ, хотя ткацкій станокъ ихъ очень примитивенъ. Гончарное искусство, видимо, забыто ими, такъ какъ на ихъ территоріи находятъ глиняные горшки. (Imperatorskaya Akademiya Nauk 1904, 42)

¹⁸ Compared to the guide from 1891, this becomes evident as a significant re-categorization. As the historian Marisa Karyl Franz noted in her article “A Visitor’s Guide to Shamans and Shamanism” (2020), the objects of the small peoples of the Far North, which were exhibited as part of the “Russian section” in 1891, were moved to the “Asia” section in 1904. This was accompanied by a new geographical conceptualization of the imperial space of the Russian Empire, in which the small peoples of the Far North (culturally) and both the Amur region and the entire Far East (geographically) were presented as exterior to the heartland of the Russian Empire.

Ainu. [...] The indigenous peoples of the Japanese archipelago were gradually driven north by the Japanese – to the island of Eso and the southern part of Sakhalin. [...] They are culturally superior to their Gilyak neighbours as they are familiar with weaving, although their loom is very primitive. Pottery seems to have been forgotten a long time ago, as clay pots have been found on their territory.

The distinction of being familiar with weaving is significant, as it marks the transition between the stages of “savagery” and the next stage of “barbarism” in Morgan’s classification scheme (Morgan 1877, 18–20). The phrasing used here – “they are culturally superior” – also highlights how temporalization was directly linked with a qualitative assessment: practising specific cultural techniques implied not only progress in time but also cultural advancement. Consequently, assigning certain groups to a developmental stage carried a clear value judgment about the respective culture. It can thus be understood as an instrument of power, which could also serve as a basis for justifying control over a region or coercing a group to culturally adapt.

The Gilyak occupy a unique position, presented as the cultural group closest to an imagined cultural origin. This is evident both from comparisons with other groups and the extensive space their objects occupy in the exhibition. Objects classified as representing “Gilyak culture” take up the most space in the exhibition, filling ten cabinets and two display cases (Imperatorskaya Akademiya Nauk 1904, 30–39). The exhibition guide implies that nothing has changed among the Gilyak since time immemorial:

Гиляки. Палеазиатское племя, [...]. Вполнѣ сохранили национальный бытъ, обычаи, религозныя воззрѣнія. (Imperatorskaya Akademiya Nauk 1904, 30)

Gilyak. Paleo-Asiatic tribe. They have fully preserved their national style, customs, and religious beliefs.

While no specific chronological period is assigned to the Gilyak, other groups, such as the Chukchi, are explicitly placed in the Neolithic period:

Чукчи. [...] Русскіе въ XVII в. застали у нихъ еще типичную культуру неолитиковъ: орудія изъ камня и кости, – культуру, въ значительной мѣрѣ сохранившуюся донынѣ (см. Коллекціи орудія и стрѣль, также скульптурныя издѣлія изъ кости). (Imperatorskaya Akademiya Nauk 1904, 20)

Chukchi. [...] In the 17th century, the Russians still encountered the typical Neolithic culture among them: Weapons made of stone and bone – a culture that has largely survived to this day (see the collection of tools and handles, also sculptures made of bone).

The descriptive text on the Chukchi clearly shows how visitors are directly addressed and how a certain way of seeing the objects and interpreting their meaning is guided. Visitors are not encouraged to view the objects as individual and unique but rather as serial types, representative of a particular cultural group, and – according to the logic of evolutionary anthropology – developmental stage.¹⁹ Whether an object is Palaeolithic, Neolithic, or much younger is not readily discernible to the layperson. However, the material of an object – whether stone, bone, or iron – can usually be identified by a non-specialist. These practices provide evidence for the new chronological classification of the exhibition display. Another technique used to suggest the affiliation of some cultural groups to ancient times is their framing as “remnants” and “leftovers” that are already in a state of extinction.²⁰ This framing can be seen in the descriptions of the Kamchadals, Itelmens, and Yukhagirs:

Камчадалы или Ительмены. [...] Русские, пришедшие с ними в столкновение с конца XVII в. застали их еще периодъ изъ камня и кости. За послѣдние два вѣка они значительно вымерли (въ настоящее время ихъ не болѣ 4000 душъ).

Юкагиры. Остатокъ палеазатскаго народа, нынѣ почти вымершаго (около 500 чел.) [...]. (Imperatorskaya Akademiya Nauk 1904, 27)

¹⁹ On this aspect of how the visitor is trained to perceive the objects as sequences, see: Bennett, Tony: *The Birth of the Museum*, New York 1995, especially the subchapters “The reordering of things” (p. 33–47) and “Seeing things” (p. 69–74); this was specially incorporated by the typological display, see: Chapman, William Ryan: “Like a Game of Dominoes”: Augustus Pitts Rivers and the Typological Museum Idea, in: Susan Pearce (Hg.), *Museum Economics and the Community*, London 1991, p. 135–176; Gosden, Chris; Larson, Frances: *Knowing Things: Exploring the Collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum, 1884–1945*, Oxford 2008.

²⁰ Although populations might have declined rapidly, there is no evidence provided for the visitor. Moreover, it would probably be almost impossible to validate this claim, as the boundaries between the respective cultural entities were only drawn and consolidated in the 18th and 19th centuries; see von Schrenck 1881, Slezkine 1994, Vermeulen 2015.

Kamchadals and Itelmens. [...] The Russians, when they clashed with them at the end of the 17th century, still encountered them in the period of stones and bones. In the last two centuries, they have largely died out (at present, no more than 4,000 souls have survived). Yukhagir. A remnant of the Paleo-Asian people, which is almost extinct today (about 500 people).

Thomsen and Morgan's classification schemes provided the foundation for translating the temporalization of the Russian Empire from ethnographic discourse into the material display of the ethnographic exhibition. In this process, the materiality of the exhibited objects gained significance as it became a marker of time. This is evident in the case of the Chukchi, whose "weapons made of stone and bone" testify to their supposedly "Neolithic culture" (Imperatorskaya Akademiya Nauk 1904, 20). Regarding Morgan's classification schemes, the category of cultural practices proved particularly well-suited to ethnographic exhibitions, as these practices could be directly linked to specific tools or implements. For example, clay pots, looms, or fishing gear functioned as markers, indicating a particular stage of development, thus suggesting a specific temporality for the object or the respective group.

The ethnographic exhibition familiarized visitors with the diversity of the Russian Empire, showcasing not only its vast geographical expanse but also its temporal depth. This approach seemingly allowed visitors to trace and depict human history back to its origins, based on the material culture of the Empire's contemporary inhabitants from the Amur. As sociologist Tony Bennett, a prominent scholar on the history and theory of the museum, observed:

The museum was another "backteller", a narrative machinery [...]. In the newly fashioned deep-times of geology, archaeology, and palaeontology, new objects of knowledge were ushered forth into the sphere of scientific visibility. The museum conferred a public visibility on these objects of knowledge. Of course, it was not alone in doing so [...]. But it was in the museum and its sibling, the exhibition, that these new pasts were made visible in the form of reconstructions based on their artefactual or osteological remains. It was also in the museum that these new pasts were organized into a narrative machinery through which, by means of the techniques of backward construction, they linked together in sequences leading from the beginnings of time to the present. (Bennett 1995, p. 178f.)

Thus, the representation/production of the Amur region in Saint Petersburg made the inhabitants of the metropolis familiar with the newly incorporated portion of the empire, situating both the region and themselves within imperial space-time. This epistemological incorporation of the region into the empire also communicated a clear distribution of power, concealed within the supposedly objective classifications of scientific knowledge. The museum narrative implied that the arrival of the Russian Empire in the Amur region marked the onset of modernity in the imperial periphery. This narrative came with a distinct set of norms and values, emphasizing the “civilizing” and “elevating” nature of imperial rule, which were conveyed to museum visitors.²¹ The Museum for Anthropology and Ethnography thereby becomes visible as an agent of empire, promoting norms and values that championed the effects of imperial rule, helping to govern its subjects both near and far, across space and time.

Outro: Primitive Art – Creating a Visual Language of Primordality

Returning to the visit of Markov and Bubnova in the autumn of 1913 and their search for primitive art in the rooms of the MAE, their focus on the Amur objects seems less arbitrary. Considering the sheer quantity of objects from the Amur region in the MAE, especially compared to those from other regions within the Russian Empire, it is unsurprising that these objects drew their attention. What is more, the material culture of the Amur region was already presented to these two young visitors as a remnant of a distant past – a testimony to the early history of humanity – framed as “primitive” by the exhibition’s narrative.

As I have demonstrated in this article, Petersburg-based scientists – especially von Schrenck and Shternberg – shaped the scientific career of the Amur region in the second half of the 19th century by establishing it as a key object of ethnographic research. They positioned the region as a site of seminal importance, as the last place on earth where the social institutions of early human history were preserved and could still be studied *in situ*. This discourse was translated into the materiality of the MAE’s exhibition narrative following the

²¹ Regarding the connection between power, state, and the disciplining nature of the museum see Bennett, Tony: “The Exhibitionary Complex”, in: *New Formations* 4 (1988), p. 73–102; and Bennett, Tony, “Civic Laboratories: Museums, Cultural Objecthood, and the Governance of the Social”, in: *Cultural Studies* 19 (5) (2005), p. 521–547.

restructuring of the collection based on the three-age system after 1897. This system, which invented the division of early human history into the Stone Age, Bronze Age, and Iron Age, gave new significance to the materiality of objects: it not only linked the collections of archaeology and ethnography but also temporalized the ethnographic collection itself. Through this new system, visitors could journey back to the earliest times of human history by viewing objects appropriated by imperial scientists from contemporaries who appeared to live not only on the fringes of the empire, but also on the fringes of time. This constituted an epistemological incorporation of the newly conquered far eastern portion of the empire. It communicated to visitors a clear positioning of the Amur region – and themselves – within the coordinates of imperial space-time, ultimately justifying and legitimizing imperial rule, both in the metropolis and on the empire’s peripheries.

Upon arriving at the Saint Petersburg collection, Markov and Bubnova had already been trained to “read” ethnographic objects from their visits to at least eleven other ethnographic displays throughout Europe, which followed similar narratives of cultural diversity grounded in the linear logic of evolutionary anthropology (Chapman 1985, Bennett 1995, Gosden/Frances 2007). This way of seeing and reading objects was further reinforced for Markov and Bubnova by current trans-European debates in art and art history at the beginning of the 20th century, where the powerful paradigm of evolutionary anthropology also gained momentum (Worringer 1907, Bushart 2007). In their quest for a radical reimagining of aesthetic expression, artists not only sought inspiration for new forms, colours, and materials from ethnographic collections (Markov 1914a, Hügel 2022). Markov’s writings reveal his pursuit of the most elemental forms of artistic creation (Markov 1912, Markov 1914a, Markov 1914b, Markov 1919). He believed he could uncover these elemental forms in what he termed “primitive art”: like the ethnographers, he assumed that something from the early history of human art and culture, long disappeared in imperial metropolises, had been preserved in the material culture of his geographically distant contemporaries. The ethnographic museum, functioning like a time machine at the heart of the empire, seemed to Markov the ideal space for this investigation.

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