

The history of South American barkcloth objects arriving at MAE

Peter The Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera) of Russian Academy of Sciences (MAE RAS) was founded in 1714 by Peter the Great, established as the first Russian state public museum in the Russian Empire. Museum ethnographic collections include more than 197,000 items representing traditional cultures of the indigenous peoples. Barkcloth objects are presented in collections from various regions - Asia, Africa, the Pacific, including rare materials from Latin America.

The first objects representing the Latin America region, arrived in the museum as early as 18th century. In its three hundred year history, the museum purchased more than 20 exceptional barkcloth objects, originating from Ecuador and French Guyana regions. MAE has been preparing a new permanent Latin America exhibition since 2011. It was opened on June 5th, 2017. Amazonia region was represented by several cases, among which ritual barkcloth objects took an important place. 16 items were chosen for permanent display.

All barkcloth objects presented at the exhibition could be divided into three groups according to their collections' apurtenance.



Fig.1 Kushma-shirt after conservation

I. Kushma shirt (MAE RAS No. 765-46). South American items from this collection entered the museum before 1855. Length - 117.0 cm; maximum width (shoulders size) - 82.0 cm. Mid-18th century.

The shirt was made of two barkcloth canvas, sewn by plant fiber twisted thread along the sides. Canvas had originally width equal to the shirt width. Both canvas front sides of the shirt were decorated with geometric ornament.

It is just noteworthy that the *Kushma* ornamentation is rather similar to Tierradentro burial chambers walls painting (Upper Magdalena river, Colombia, A.D. 600 – 900. The observation by Prof. Yu. Berezkin, the Head of MAE RAS American ethnography Department) - Fig.1,2.

The place of objects' origin is not yet known.

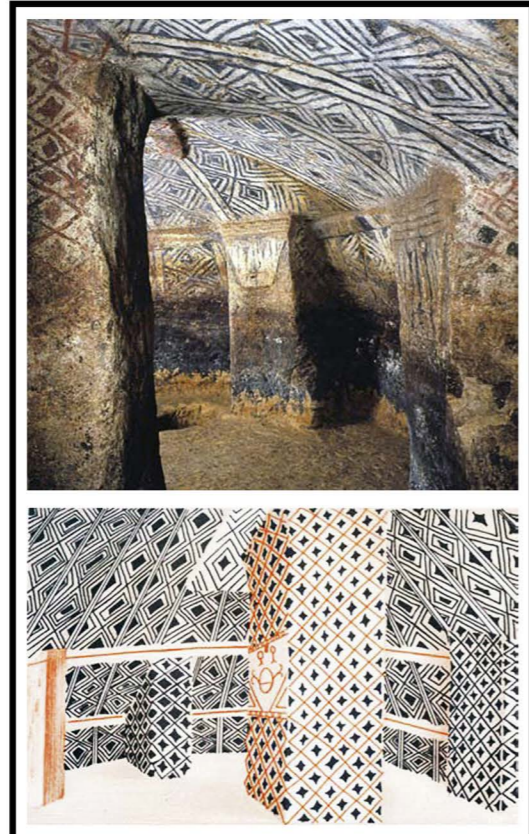


Fig.2 Tierradentro wall painting (Fernández, 2011; Hernández de Alba, 1938)

II. Collection 1063 contained a number of clothing, jewelry, household and worship objects from Ecuador. MAE received it in 1906 from baron Gabriel Ginzburg collection. There are 16 barkcloth items in total in the collection and 11 of them were chosen for exhibition. Gabriel Ginzburg (1853–1929), a Parisian banker, was married to the Portuguese aristocrat, Henriette Lasskaya. Her 1st husband was antiquary Germaine Bapsta. So the collection 1063 theoretically could be from this source.

Ritual canvas (MAE RAS No. 1063-1) – the most impressive object of this group.

Length - 205.5 cm; width - 116.0 cm.

The canvas was made of two rectangular barkcloth pieces. It was ornamented by longitudinal stripes, painted with dark and light brown colors. The ornament was applied in light brown color, contoured with dark brown pigment – Fig.10, central part.



Fig. 3 Chief costume after conservation

III. One of the most valuable and outstanding exhibited objects is the tribal chief's costume which comprised four items. The collection No 2135, containing clothing and jewelry of the Rucuyen Indians (Caribes group) from southern part of French Guyana was acquired by MAE in 1913 from London antiquary William Ockelford Oldman.

There is an antiquaries' letter addressed to MAE senior ethnographer Leo Sternberg, preserved in the museum documentation. In this document Oldman mentioned brief information about the barkcloth costume acquired by MAE RAS. According to his catalog (Oldman, 1913), this costume, consisting of 4 items, belonged to the tribe's chief and originated from Ecuador territory. – Fig.3,4.

Shirt (MAE RAS No. 2135 – 1).

Length - 91.0 cm; width - 44.0 cm.

Barkcloth undershirt decorated with reddish-brown and black painted ornament.

Coat (MAE RAS No. 2135 – 2).

Maximum length - 76.0 cm; maximum width - 75.0 cm.

Wide barkcloth waistcoat. The external surface was decorated with twisted plant fiber cords, feathers, seeds, seeds of beans and animal canine teeth.

Skirt ("Kilt") (MAE RAS No. 2135 – 3).

Base length - 57.0 cm; top width - 75.0 cm; bottom width - 114.5 cm; length with pen-dants - 62.5 cm.

The right side of the skirt was also decorated with twisted plant fiber cords, feathers, cylindrical bird bones, Job's-tears seeds (Cóixilácrima-jóbi), mollusc shells and animal canine teeth.

Headdress ("Hat") (MAE RAS No. 2135-4).

Height - 20.2 cm; diameter - 20.5 cm.

The hat is woven of straw and twisted plant fiber threads. The external surface was decorated with teeth, feathers and beetles' elytra.

Condition survey and conservation treatment of the barkcloth materials

The MAE RAS objects storage system was organized on a regional basis. Within each department objects are systematized according to their materials, but in a complex combined storage. Unfortunately, at the moment MAE doesn't have possibilities to create special regulating systems to ensure optimal microclimate conditions.

Barkcloth items selected for exhibition have been stored in the museum for more than a century.

The objects have been examined very closely and we met numerous condition problems and different signs of deterioration and damages – dirt and stains, marks of insect infestations, deformations, tears, creases etc. They are associated with very specific features of barkcloth material as well as the effects of old storage conditions.

After a detailed condition survey by storage curators and conservators, seven barkcloth objects including elements of unique tribe chief costume were treated in the MAE RAS Conservation Laboratory.

Conservation treatment included different steps and operations: surface cleaning, removing of dust and other contaminants; humidification and relaxing the creases; stabilization of brittle fibers and areas of potential loss; tear repairing; cleaning and conservation of decorative elements.

Surface cleaning was the first step in the conservation program. Because the barkcloth is moisture sensitive we used several dry cleaning methods. Objects were cleaned with a vacuum-cleaner and different kinds of special sponges, eraser crumbs and Groom Stick. Specific contaminants and stains were removed mechanically, some of them - after local softening with Steam pencil.

For repairing tears fine silk patches dyed in appropriate colors were used.

In the course of mounting items on display particular attention was paid to the special mounts and individual supporting systems.

This project required complex joint work between scientists, storage curators, conservators and technical staff.



Fig. 5, 6 A huge tear of barkcloth before and after conservation (Kushma shirt)

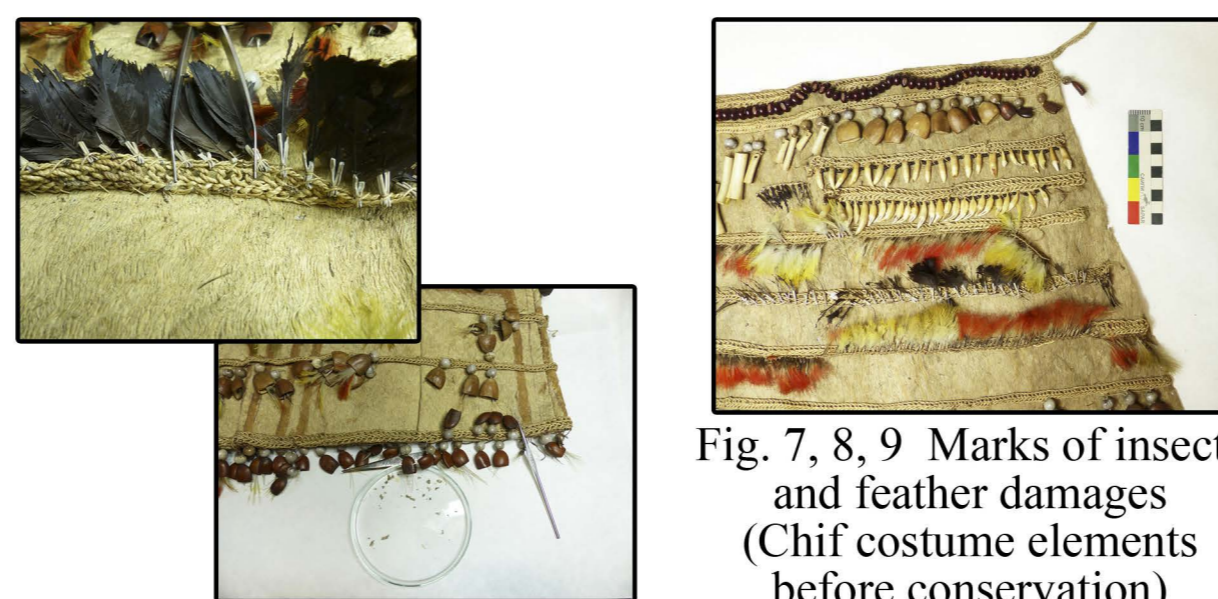


Fig. 7, 8, 9 Marks of insects and feather damages (Chif costume elements before conservation)

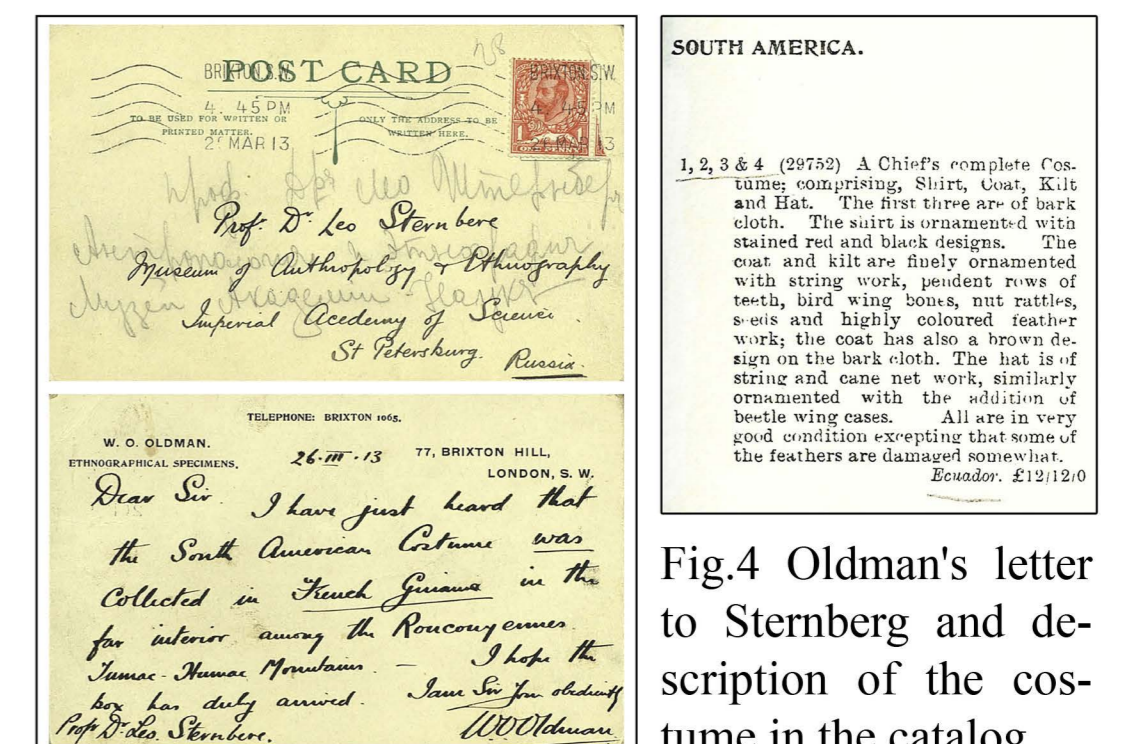


Fig.4 Oldman's letter to Sternberg and description of the costume in the catalog

References

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MAE RAS Document no. 765
MAE RAS Document no. 1063
MAE RAS Document no. 2135

The new museum permanent exhibition, dedicated to Latin American traditional cultures, was opened on June 5, 2017.

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Fig. 10

Virtual 3D Tour: <http://www.kunstkamera.ru/en/>
(Latin America. Panorama 5)